

John E. Bowlt

PAVEL FILONOV AND ATOMIC ENERGY¹

To create means to be able to make,
but you can make only if you know
exactly what you want to do in every
atom of the picture being made,
and, in so doing, you must rely
exclusively on your own analytical
force and the exact sciences.²

The subject is the work of Pavel Nikolaevich Filonov (1883–1941), especially his interest in the concept of “flowering” (*rastsvet*) and, more broadly, in the natural sciences.³ The focus of the essay, therefore, is on three constituents

¹ The text is published as submitted by the author.

² P. Filonov: “Osnova prepodavaniia izobrazitel’nogo iskusstva po printsipu chistogo analiza kak shkola tvorchestva. Sistema ‘Mirovyi rastsvet’ ” (1923). RGALI, f. 2348, op. 1, ed. khr. 8, l. 2.

³ On Filonov see N. Misler and J. Bowlt, eds.: *A Hero and His Fate*, Austin: Silvergirl, 1983; E. Kovtun et al., eds.: *Pavel Filonov: Zhivopis’. Grafika: Iz sobraniia Gos. Russkogo muzeia*. Catalog of exhibition at the State Russian Museum, 1988; J.-H. Martin et al.: *Pavel Filonov*. Catalog of exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1990; J. Harten and E. Petrova, eds.: *Pavel Filonov*. Catalog of exhibition at the Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf, 1990; N. Misler and Dzh. Boulton: *Filonov. Analiticheskoe iskusstvo*, Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1990; N. Misler and J. Bowlt: *Die Physiologie der Malerei: Pavel Filonov in der 20er Jahren // The Physiology of Painting: Pavel Filonov in the 1920s*. Catalog of exhibition at the Galerie Gmurzynska. Cologne, 1992; Yu. Markin: *Pavel Filonov*, Moscow: Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo, 1995; L. Tkachenko: *Filonov*, St. Petersburg: Znak, 2000; G. Ershov: *Pavel Filonov*, Moscow; Belyi gorod, 2001; E. Kovtun, ed.: *P. Filonov. Dnevnik*, St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2000; E. Petrova, ed.: *Filonov*, St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2001; *Pavel Nikolaevich Filonov*. Special issue of *Experiment*, Los Angeles, 2005 (No. 11); Dzh. Boulton, N. Misler, A. Sarab’ianov, eds.: *Filonov. Khudozhnik. Issledovatel’. Uchitel’*, Moscow: Agei Tomesh, 2006; E. Petrova, ed.: *Pavel Filonov. Ochevidets*



Pavel Filonov
Formula of the Cosmos
 1920–1928 Watercolor,
 ink on paper The State
 Russian museum,
 St. Petersburg

of Filonov's "Neo-Naturalism" – botany, physiology and then, more tentatively and more briefly, atomic energy.

First of all, why look at Filonov and the natural sciences? Because, in his extensive writings, Filonov makes numerous references to the exact sciences and to scientists, and, after 1918, often applies the term "formula" to his pictures – such as *Formula of the Cosmos* (GRM). Of course, in his application of the term "formula" to his paintings Filonov was not alone. His colleague at Ginkhuk, Pavel Mansurov, for example, also referred to his pictures as "painterly formulae".¹

nezrimogo. Catalog of exhibition at the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, 2006;

I. Galeev et al.: *Filonovtsy: Ot MAI do postavangarda*. Catalog of exhibition at Art-Divazh, Moscow, 2006; A. Laks, comp.: *Pavel Filonov. Sbornik statei*, St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2007; L. Pravoverova: *Pavel Filonov. Real'nost' i mify*, Moscow: Agraf, 2008; M. Sokolov: *Pavel Filonov*, Moscow: Art-Rodnik, 2008; L. Vostretsova, ed.: *Pavel Filonov; Pobeda nad vechnost'iu. Risunki i akvareli iz sobraniia Gos. Russkogo muzeia*. Catalog of exhibition at the Museum of Visual Art, Ekaterinburg, 2009. The greater part of Filonov's pictorial oeuvre is in the collection of the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (here after: GRM).

¹ See E. Kovtun et al.: *Paul Mansouff et l'avant-garde russe à Petrograd*. Catalog of exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Nice, 1995.

BOTANY

Let us begin with Filonov and botany by comparing his painterly practice to a natural phenomenon, for he strove to create the work of art as if it were a living thing. For Filonov, the canvas was a tract of fertile earth to be sown with a multitude of seeds from the artist's spirit: the artist was responsible for every atom of the pictorial surface and any complexity of form and colour stemming from the artist's intuition was to be incorporated into the picture. As a result, the tentacular lines, exotic colour combinations and lush facture of Filonov's paintings (especially of the later period after he had developed his analytical theory) are reminiscent of some vast and bizarre plantation. One explanation for the curious and extreme accumulation of natural forms in Filonov's paintings may be found in his own theoretical construction of reality: "[The artist] activates all the predicates of the object and of its orbit: its own reality, its own pulsation and that of its orbit, its bio-dynamics, intellect, emanations, interfusions, geneses and atoms – in short, life as a whole].¹

On numerous occasions, Filonov described the artistic process in botanical terms, bidding the artist represent what he called the bio-dynamics of reality, as, for example, in his own *Formula of the Petrograd Proletariat* (1920–21). He also read the tracts of prominent scientists such as Charles Darwin and Dmitrii Mendeleev and, more specifically, Carl Linné – trying to paint not only the external aspect of a plant or tree, but also the inner processes of fertilization, maturation and circulation. Filonov even had the artist paint the scent of trees and their entire biosphere: physiological processes occurring in trees as well as the smell which they exude and which surrounds them; we paint the processes occurring within them and creating numerous phenomena within their sphere.²

Filonov extended this idea to the notion of a purely biological portrait of humans and



Pavel Filonov
*Formula of the
 Petrograd Proletariat*
 1920–1921
 Oil on canvas
 The Sate Russian
 museum,
 St. Petersburg

¹ P. Filonov: "Deklaratsiia Mirovogo rastsveta" in *Zhizn' iskusstva*. Petrograd, 1923, No. 20, p. 15.

English translation in Misler and Bowlt, *Pavel Filonov. A Hero and His Fate*, p. 170.

² P. Filonov: "Avtobiografiia" (1929). English translation in Misler and Bowlt, *Pavel Filonov. A Hero and His Fate*, p. 122.



Pavel Filonov
Flowers of the Universal Flowering. 1915
 Oil on canvas
 The Sate Russian museum,
 St. Petersburg



Pavel Filonov
Wild Flowers. 1936
 Oil on canvas
 The Sate Russian museum,
 St. Petersburg

animals, referring to the processes which occur: within the individual and within the sphere around him and the emanations egressing from the individual into the sphere.¹

Curiously enough, Kazimir Malevich even seems to have shared Filonov's basic idea that nature was in flux, without beginning or end, as he indicated in his manifesto *On New Systems in Art* of 1919: We exclaim: «How beautiful nature is!» But why is she beautiful? Would a flower really be beautiful, if there were not another, adjacent form or if the flower lacked its variegated structure? No, it would not be. Beauty and the beautiful come forth because nature consists of the most diverse signs.²

With this inner, horticultural perspective in mind, therefore, we might approach Filonov's art as a spacious nursery or *orangérie* in which the artist tends plants, shrubs and flowers, growing, grafting, pruning and cultivating marvelous orchids, exotic hybrids and intricate bouquets. In Filonov's hot-house there are rare and precious species, highly coloured, pungent and poisonous, forming a garden run wild, a universal flowering in which lianas and creepers, pedigrees and weeds, perennials and annuals seem to be growing out of control. Here is a botanical chaos challenging Linné's classification and regimentation and seeming to extend Filonov's own obsession with the painting of "flowers and fruits of all kinds"³ as, for example, in *Girl with Flowers* (1905, GRM) or *Wild Flowers* (1925, GRM). According to Filonov, "in nature the cell of the bloom is connected to the flower".⁴

On the one hand, Filonov was expanding the Symbolists' "forest of symbols", reinforcing Charles Baudelaire's attraction to flowers, if not of evil, then of good, and perhaps remembering Mikhail Vrubel's numerous floral arrangements (e.g. *Lilacs* of 1900) or the Saratov and Moscow groups of artists, "Crimson Rose" and "Blue Rose". On the other hand, Filonov associated "flowering" not only with flowers, but also with humans, animals and, in particular the apple-tree, and, by extension, to Genesis – and, presumably, to Dürer's, Cranach's and Bosch's Gardens of Paradise: [In their paintings, drawings and sculptures] the masters of analytical art are working with the kind of content which has not yet become currency in the field of global art. For example, the biological, physiological, chemical and other phenomena and processes of the organic and inorganic world, their emergence,

¹ Filonov, "Deklaratsiia Mirovogo rastsveta", p.15. English translation in Misler and Bowlt, *Pavel Filonov. A Hero and His Fate*, p. 170.

² K. Malevich: *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve*, Vitebsk (1919). Reprinted in A. Shatskih, ed.: *Kazimir Malevich. Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, Moscow: Gileia, 1995, p. 155

³ Filonov, "Avtobiographiia" (1929). English translation in Misler and Bowlt: *Pavel Filonov. A Hero and His Fate*, p. 121.

⁴ P. Filonov: "Ideologiiia analiticheskogo iskusstva" in Boulton, Misler and Sarab'ianov, *Filonov. Khudozhnik. Issledovatel'. Uchitel'*, Vol. 1, p. 52.



Mikhail Vrubel
Lilac. 1900
 Oil on canvas
 The State Tretyakov
 Gallery, Moscow

transmutation, radiation, dissolution, dynamics and bio-dynamics..., sound, language, growth, etc.

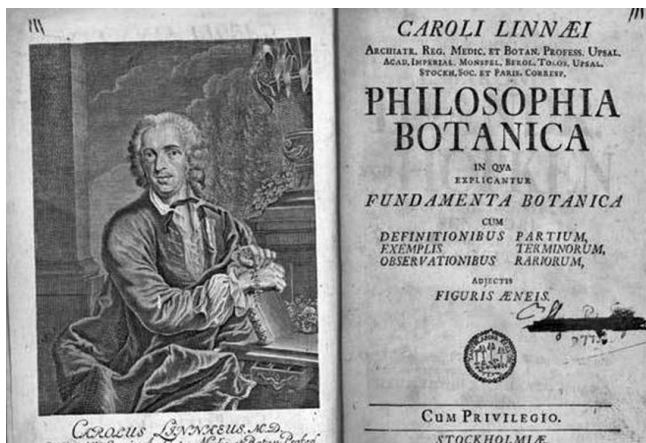
For example, when we look at the trunk, branches, leaves and flowers of, let's say, an apple-tree, we [should] also analyze and try to find out how the tendrils of the roots take in and absorb the juices of the soil, how these juices flow upwards into the cells of the wood, how they distribute themselves as they react to light and warmth, how they are converted and transformed into the atomic structure of the trunk, the branches, the green of the foliage, the red and white of the flowers, the green-yellow-pink apples and the rough bark of the tree itself.¹

In this context, it makes sense to look at the works of Carl (Antoine Laurent) Linné, in particular, in order to try and discover what attracted Filonov to the organic esthetic. After all, Filonov recommended that his students read up on Linné, and, certainly, acquaintance with Linné's treatises sheds light on some of Filonov's imagery. Linné was the first to develop and publish a binominal nomenclature for plants in his fundamental tract *Philosophia Botanica* in 1751 which he then elaborated into his *Species Plantarum* two years later. Inasmuch as the latter, in particular, became a fundamental compendium for botanists, was well known

Pavel Filonov
Small Apple. 1925
 Watercolor, ink, pencil
 on paper. The Sate
 Russian museum,
 St. Petersburg



¹ P. Filonov: "Kratkoe poiasnenie k vystavke rabot" (1928). English translation in Misler and Bowlt, *Pavel Filonov. A Hero and His Fate*, Austin, p. 253.



Title page of first
edition of Linnaeus'
Philosophia Botanica
Stockholm, 1751

in Russia, existed in numerous Russian translations and was known to Filonov, it is reasonable to reference it. Incidentally, one of the first Russian translations of Linné was of his *Spiritus frumenti quem praeside* (*Vodka v rukakh filosofo, vracha i prosto liudina – Vodka in the hands of the philosopher, the physician and the simple folk*, St. Petersburg, 1790)!

What brings Linné close to Filonov is not necessarily vodka or the scientific identification of plants and the application of Latin titles, but, rather, the sketches, monochrome or coloured, of the shapes and forms which plants and their various members could assume. In Linné's books Filonov read about stigma, filament, capsule, pappus, seed – and the peculiar shapes which they could adopt such as cluster, raceme, whorl and panicle, figures which Linné illustrated with his numerous images. These drawings present not only entire leaves, stems or flowers, but also cross-sections and inner structures, exactly the kind of spiral, cell or vein which Filonov explored in his compositions and which often seem to hover or float as independent organisms:

Learning about form. Analysis, intuition, spontaneity, dynamics and bio-dynamics, raw and organic form. Form sharply revealed. Pure active form. Formula. Substratum and the analytical decomposition and transformation of form. Selection. Constructive and colour deduction. Law and canon of the construction of form and their correlation with the law and canon of the construction of the painting (or of anything made, independent of the kind and principle of the material being used). Madeness of form. Madeness with form as the constructive deduction or insertion.¹

That Filonov regarded the work of art as a growth – as a flower or flowering which continued to evolve irrespective of the artist – is itself arresting, although equally important is the fact that often he was attempting, literally, to paint the natural processes of a plant. Of course, Filonov's visual occupation with flowers was not that of the 18th and 19th century naturalist

¹ Filonov, "Osnova prepovadaniia izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva po printsipu chistogo analiza kak vysshaia shkola tvorchestva. Sistema 'Mirovoj rastsvet'", RGALI, f. 2348, op. 1, ed. khr. 8, l. 3.

or the professional painter of flowers such as the Russian floralist Ivan Khrutsky and he would have had little praise for the pompous renderings of bouquets of daffodils or roses by artists of the salon. In Filonov's opinion the artist was to depict not only the apparently static exterior of the flower or the tree, but also its inner, dynamic processes, energy, vitality and transmutation as a living, organic entity.

On one level, the straightforward desire to paint the interior workings of the flower – the cells, spores, sap, fibers, etc. – seems overwhelmingly simple and innocent and a number of Filonov's paintings can be accepted almost as Naturalist renderings. The rose in the hand of the little boy in the photo-Realist portrait of Filonov's brother-in-law (1915, GRM) or the flowers on the screen behind his sister (also of 1915, GRM; for example, could be read almost as figures and illustrations from early 19th century textbooks on the species and varieties of the plants. Filonov would have been able to consult such books as well as specimens at the Kunstkammer in St. Petersburg which he frequented and which boasted rich holdings devoted to flowers and plants and even seaweeds. As a matter of fact, in 1936 Filonov's stepson, Anatolii Serebriakov, a natural scientist, published a long essay on the Kunstkammer for the Academy of Sciences, a conjunction which brings us to Physiology.¹



Pavel Filonov
*Portrait of Evdokiya
Nikolaevna Glebova,
the Artist's Sister. 1915*
Oil on canvas
The Sate Russian
museum, St. Petersburg

PHYSIOLOGY

Filonov supported and promoted what he considered to be a scientific attitude towards the natural world and – what needs to be emphasized – he was well read in the theories of Darwin and Ivan Michurin, but his vision was peculiar, to say the least. On the one hand, he regarded reality as a gigantic excrescence – a “universal flowering”; on the other, he questioned and undermined the conventional departmentalization of the organic world into animal, vegetable and mineral. For Filonov everything was alive, but what botanists, biologists and zoologists had classified and labeled was not necessarily what he accepted and he seems to have been more fascinated by the possibilities of what today is called agricultural modification and genetic engineering. In his pictures not only animals assume human expressions as in *Animals* (1925–26; GRM) and humans wear beflowered shirts (as in *East and West* (1912–17; GRM), but also freaks and mythological beasts compete with bizarre, hybrid flowers in Filonov's unending jungle.

Even more ominous are the saltatory changes in the biological sequence which Filonov seems to be proposing whereby the human, animal, vegetable and mineral transcend conventional barriers and perimeters. There

¹ A. Serebriakov: “Zoologicheskii kabinet Kunstkamery” in *Arkhiv istorii nauki i tekhniki*, St. Petersburg, 1936, Series 1, No. 9, pp. 69–128.



Pavel Filonov
Animals. 1925–1926
 Oil on canvas
 The Sate Russian
 museum, St. Petersburg

are several examples of this forced interfusion of the various species: in *The Gardener* (1913), for example, a human hand seems to be growing out of a leaf in the central pot of roses, while flowers and faces in the top left fuse into an ambiguous cameo. The blouses of the boys in *Two Boys* (1909–10; GRM) constitute an organic synthesis as if the material and texture of the shirts were animate and you even make out the head of a little girl growing out of the boy's shoulder. Here was the kind of hybrid, freak or nature's joke that Filonov would have identified with the two-headed sheep and other such malignancies of the *Kunstkammer*. Not that such specimens of re-evolution were all that outlandish. After all, the common mule is a cross between



Pavel Filonov
The Gardener. 1913
 Oil on canvas
 The Sate Russian
 museum,
 St. Petersburg



a horse and an ass and nature continues to play pranks, crossing a zebra and a donkey into a “zonkey” and a whale and a dolphin into a “wolphin”. No doubt, Filonov was thinking about such transitions when he painted the man cum pig in *Formula of the Bourgeoisie* (1924–25).

Perhaps it is in this sense that Filonov used the terms “canon” and “law” as, for example, in his tract *Kanon i zakon* [Canon and law] of 1912. To Filonov there seemed to be a basic difference between the eternal and immutable laws of the universe and the shifting, flexible canons or conventions that are imposed upon them. In other words, while there might be primary species (animal, vegetable mineral), there were variants and versions that composed, decomposed and recomposed. This contrast between intrinsic law and extrinsic interpretation (something like the difference between rhythm and meter in poetry) also lay at the basis of anatomical analyses which Filonov read avidly and often paraphrased. Sections in the standard treatises of the 1890s not only highlight the traditional tension between rules and their applications, but also expose a primary source for Filonov’s own deliberations on his right to undermine and change anatomical laws – and to extrapolate and separate out the various members of the human body, something which he does, for example, in the *Head and the Thumb* of 1925 (GRM). Some of these treatises were also distinguished by a disproportionate emphasis on physiological abnormality and on the fleeting gesture and shifting expression, i.e. on digressions from the legitimate standard. Many of the photographs illustrating Russian anatomical atlases of ca. 1900, incidentally, came from the

Boris Kustodiev
*Portrait of Peter
Kapitza*. 1926
Oil on canvas
Fitzwilliam Museum,
Cambridge

collection of Lev Dmitriev-Kavkazsky, Filonov's first professor, while the renderings of arms and legs were taken from models fashioned by the sculptor Giugo Zaleman (one of Filonov's teachers at the Academy).

All this is to say that the Russian anatomical atlas of ca. 1900 was paying homage to an intense and universal interest in the "canon", i.e. in deviations from the norm (the law), which, in turn, was engendering ideas about physiological mutation. This interest encompassed not only fantasies about the "creation of beings organized after natural laws", as the Darwinist Ernst Haeckel wrote in his *Histoire de la création des êtres organisés d'après les lois naturelles* of 1874,¹ but also excessive states of mind and their bodily expression such as ecstasy, epilepsy, hysteria and delirium. The further hypothesis was, therefore, that one day an experimental medicine with the advanced science of physiology would make new animals – Franksteins – and Filonov's pictures of heads, animals and plants seem often to be weird and wonderful predictions of this, a universal growth which has no natural barriers or predators and which relates to Filonov's concurrent obsession with physiology and surgical intervention. After all, he had his students «Cut the object of your study and painting as if with a scalpel»,² advising them to acquaint themselves with the life and work of Nikolai Pirogov, Russia's 19th century pioneering surgeon. In other words, there are curious, if uncomfortable, parallels between the botanist's dissection of the flower, the surgeon's procedure at the operating-table and Filonov's incising the surface of the canvas.

ATOMIC ENERGY

Incision brings us to the third tendency in Filonov's creativity – his focus on the atom, if not atomic energy. He often used the word atom, telling his disciples to pay attention to the "atomic and inner atomic connections"³ within the object of study and to the «cubage, volume, weight, cells and atomistic quality of form»⁴ and that what needed to be painted was not just the boots or trousers of the model, but also the atoms: "Every atom must be made... Think obdurately and accurately over each atom of the work being made".⁵

By bearing in mind Filonov's atomic terminology, we might understand – a little more clearly – some of his images of the early and mid-1920s with their whorls, spirals, magnetic fields, ellipses – and atoms. Filonov's more

¹ E. Haeckel: *Histoire de la création des êtres organisés d'après les lois naturelles*, Paris: Reinwald, 1874.

² P. Filonov: "Osnovnye polozheniia analiticheskogo iskusstva" (1923?). English translation in Misler and Bowlt, *Pavel Filonov. A Hero and His Fate*, p. 150.

³ P. Filonov: "Kratkoe poiasnenie k vystavke rabot" (1928). Reprinted in E. Kovtun, ed.: *Pavel Filonov*, p. 108. English translation in Misler and Bowlt, *Pavel Filonov. A Hero and His Fate*, p. 253.

⁴ Filonov, "Osnova prepodavaniia izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva po printsipu chistogo analiza, kak vysshiaia shkola tvorchestva. Sistema 'Mirovyi rastsvet'". Reprinted in Misler i Bowlt, *Filonov*, p. 185.

⁵ Filonov, "Osnova prepodavaniia izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva po printsipu chistogo analiza kak shkola tvorchestva. Sistema 'Mirovyi rastsvet'", (1923). RGALI, f. 2348, op. 1, ed. khr. 8, l. 4.

abstract paintings and drawings of that time are rife with particles speeding at high velocity in circles or racing across the surface, as if released from bombardments or going awry in magnetic fields: Analytical madeness is a means of expressing the maximum understanding of the content after working obdurately on the model and the material and offering a maximum of metamorphosis of the consistency of the material being introduced into the work [of art] so that you will never allow a single atom not to be what you want it to be.¹

True, in Post-Revolutionary Russia Filonov was not alone in his references to the atom. Andrei Platonov, whose prose is often compared to Filonov's painting, spoke boldly of atomic power as early as 1922: "Proletarian culture», he wrote, "Must be what is lying within the world of electromagnetic waves, in the atom split,"² (although) "even the energy of Rutherford's split atom is nothing in comparison to the energy of the ocean of light [i.e., the sun, JB]".³

But this begs the central question: How did Filonov, ill versed in physics, find out about atomic properties? In using the term "atom", did he really understand protons and neutrons? Probably, not and perhaps, like many of us, he may have been at a loss to define the differences between molecules, particles, cells and atoms. On the other hand, even in blockaded Russia and war-torn Petrograd, he must have known about Lord Ernest Rutherford's experiments in the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge and his momentous splitting of the atom in a nuclear reaction between nitrogen and alpha particles in 1917. The Russian press did report this and Russia's scientific community, however distraught at that time, was certainly aware of the discovery. Even so, on this level, the Filonov-atom connection is still guesswork based on circumstantial evidence and hard facts are needed to clinch the argument.

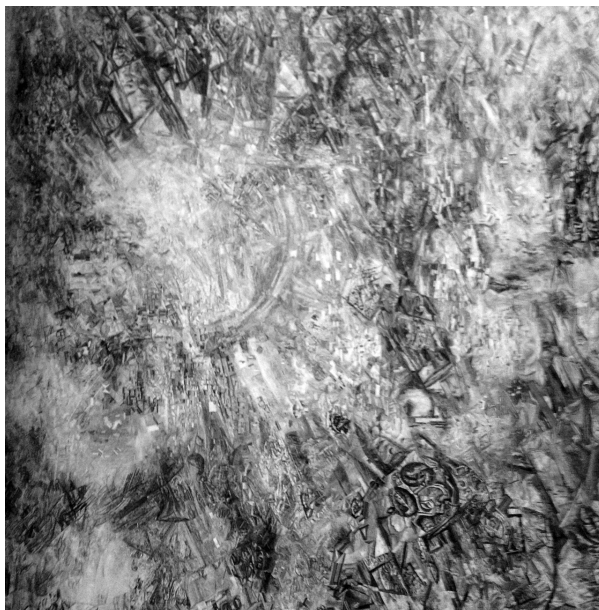
It so happens that Rutherford's principal collaborator had been a young Russian called Petr Kapitsa (Peter Kapitza).⁴ A student of the prominent physicist Abram Ioffe and colleague of Nikolai Semenov, another physicist, Kapitsa came from Petrograd to join Rutherford in 1921 and stayed in Cambridge – with frequent returns to Leningrad – until 1934 (Boris Kustodiev's 1926 portrait of him now graces the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge). Could it be that Filonov and Kapitsa had known each other and discussed atomic energy during the latter's visits back home throughout the 1920s? Did Filonov talk to Boris Kustodiev, the Petrograd artist and creator of two portraits of Kapitsa? Alas, Kustodiev ignores Filonov in his memoirs, no critical appreciations of Filonov's art refer to Kapitsa and Filonov himself, in his highly censored and expurgated diaries of the 1920s-30s,

¹ P. Filonov: "Я буду говорить» (ca. 1924) in Boulton, Misler and Sarab'ianov, *Filonov. Khudozhnik, Issledovatel'. Uchitel'*, Vol. 1, p. 137.

² A. Platonov: "O kul'ture zapriazhennogo sveta I poznannogo elektrichestva" in *Iskusstvo i teatr*, Voronezh, 1922, August, No. 2, pp. 2–3. I am indebted to Thomas Seifrid for this reference.

³ A. Platonov: "Svet i sotsializm" in *Russian Literature*, Amsterdam, 1988, No. XXIII, pp. 387–89.

⁴ On Petr Kapitsa see D. Shoenberg, J. Boag and P. Rubinin: *Kapitza in Cambridge and Moscow: Life and Letters of a Russian Physicist*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1990.



Pavel Filonov
Cosmos (Universal
 Shift via the Russian
 Revolution). 1922
 Oil on canvas
 The Sate Russian
 museum,
 St. Petersburg

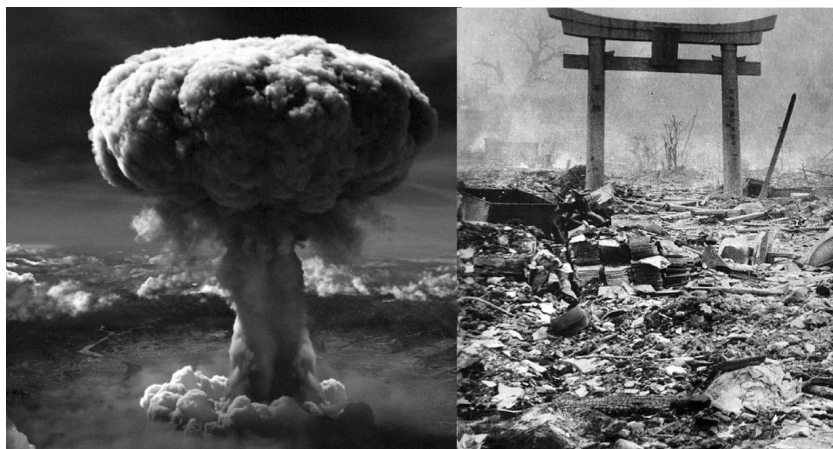
omits any reference. So the argument might be sheer speculation were it not for two curious pieces of evidence:

1) In the late 1920s and early 1930s Kapitsa's mother, Ol'ga, worked as an editor in the Detgiz publishing-house in Leningrad where Tat'iana Glebova, Alisa Poret, and other *filonovtsy* illustrated children's stories. Thanks to this connection Filonov presented Ol'ga Kapitsa with one of his drawings which, apparently, is still among Petr Kapitsa's unsorted papers in the Museum.¹

2) The memoirs of Filonov's elder sister, Evdokiia, also provide valuable testimony. Writing of the almost surreptitious exhibition of Filonov's works held in Novosibirsk in 1967 long after the artist's death, she recalled that among the many prestigious guests had been Kapitsa's wife and daughter-in-law.² The fact that Kapitsa, then still hail and hearty, but now living in Moscow, had sent his wife and daughter-in-law thousands of kilometres across Siberia to look at Filonov's pictures demonstrates, surely, a long and respectful alliance – a friendship – between the artist and scientist. We also learn that, in Brezhnev's 1970s, risking his academic station, Kapitsa countenanced an unofficial exhibition of modern Russian art in the foyer of his Institute of Physical Problems in Moscow at which Filonov occupied pride of place. Well, if too early to accept these episodes as irrefutable testimony, it is still very tempting to forge the links yet tighter – and to retain faith in these cosmic or, should we say, atomic, connections.

¹ According to Tat'iana Baakhovskaia, director of the Petr Kapitsa Cabinet-Museum, in conversation with John E. Bowlit, Moscow, 3 March, 2017.

² E. Glebova: "Vospominaniia o brate" in Pravoverova, *Filonov. Real'nost' i mify*, p. 128



Hiroshima Photo
1945

Filonov seems not to have used the words “formula”, “universal flowering” and “atom” after 1930. His last decade was marked by sadness and despair as his microscopic eyesight began to fail, as he fell from political grace, condemned as being alien to the proletariat; his sister’s husband was arrested and his two step-sons were executed, some of his students committed suicide or turned against him and for many years his name was absent from the history of Soviet art.

So how to end this tentative exploration into Filonov’s atomic art? Perhaps with another of those strange coincidences. Filonov died on 3 December, 1941, in the Leningrad blockade, the very moment that President Roosevelt ordered the Los Alamos Laboratory to develop the atom bomb – and suddenly we realize where we have seen Filonov’s compositions elsewhere – it is as if, in the eerie dislocations of his fissile landscapes, he foresaw the atomic tragedy which still haunts our collective memory.