

Brave the Heavenly Breezes

Axel Straschnoy

Written by Javier Villa

Del Infito, November 2023

A middle-aged white man fantasizes about launching a rocket into space. He may be Argentinian and lack any kind of scientific training but he could make that wish come true tomorrow if only he had enough momentum to get through the atmosphere. His space ship's mission is to explore the outer reaches of the galaxy and the instinct that underlies it is hardly unfamiliar: from Alexander the Great to Christopher Columbus all the way to Elon Musk, middle aged white men have always been greatly excited by the prospect of expeditions and conquest. However, the golden vessel that Axel Straschnoy plans to send out into space is not backed by any great empire. It has no cameras or radar. It has no communications technology and can't even be set on a determined course. It is a space-time flaneur, a geometric abstraction whose very lack of a mission has the potential to open up new black holes for the imagination.

Axel may well be one of the few people working today on finding a way to launch a solar sail through the atmosphere, but the idea dates all the way back to Ancient Greece. 'At midday, when we'd lost sight of the island, a hurricane suddenly sprang up, spinning the ship around and lifting it the height of three hundred stadia. It did not let the ship back down onto the sea but rather filled the sail and stretched the canvas, pushing it ever higher with each gust. After floating through the air for seven days and nights, on the eighth day we caught sight of an enormous earth in the sky, like an island, bright and spherical, gleaming with light. We were dragged toward it, docked and disembarked. During the exploration of the country we discovered that it was inhabited and crops were grown. During the day, we could see nothing from there but when night came we could see many other islands close by, some large and others small, their colour similar to fire, and another land below with cities, rivers, seas, forests and mountains. We deduced that it must be our world.' After the Greeks, perhaps the most famous dreamer was Johannes Kepler, who, discussing the possibility of finding life on the moons of Jupiter, said to his friend Galileo that, '(...) As soon as some kind of flying system is established there shall be no lack of colonists among our human species. Who would ever have thought that sailing across a vast ocean would be more safe and tranquil than crossing the very narrow Adriatic Gulf, the Baltic Sea or the English Channel? Suppose there were ships or sails suited to the heavenly breezes and those unafraid of even that vast space?'

The solar sail for heavenly breezes being designed by Axel is founded on simple scientific principles, but the material practicalities are something of an obstacle for a poetic project with no support from an established space agency. Made with multilayered golden isolation materials used to protect probes and satellites from losing heat through thermal radiation, the geometric frame Axel has designed will take thousands of years to leave the solar system but, driven by traction from a few photons gathered from the Sun, will keep going until it disintegrates. The *Brave the Heavenly Breezes* project is part of a research and imaginative process in which making an independent journey to outer space with no clear purpose in mind can take all the time it needs. This independence and firm belief in the poetic gesture are political decisions, especially when every milligram and millimetre of technology that escapes the atmosphere is regulated and must have a scientific function. Where Debord the flaneur rebuilds the city through his aimless wandering, Axel rebuilds our relationship with the Cosmos, which feels increasingly distant from the everyday citizen. Axel, however, refuses to cede outer space to eccentric billionaires. Space is the domain of science and economics, but also spirituality and the imagination. Science isn't just an economic asset, just as religion is not the only branch of the humanities to explore spirituality. Similarly, we might affirm that the imagination is not exclusive to the art world but a tool possessed by every member of humanity that, mixed with science and spirituality, has the potential to tread a more inclusive path along which to wander among the stars.

In Byzantine art, gold was a spiritual symbol for Heaven. Today, space probes gleam golden in the dark void of space, inverting established colour schemes for figure and background. On its journey, *Brave the Heavenly Breezes* drifts from the temple and Byzantine gold leaf to NASA's golden Kapton. The imagination of the explorer is supported by the practicality of science and driven by spirituality. That means that it is eminently possible to launch a spiritual quest in a disenchanting world, and art is right tool through which to do so.

Javier Villa