After 10 successful years, we are introducing a new ARTISTS ON SCIENCE, SCIENTISTS ON ART series of THEATRUM MUNDI. In view of the bicentennial of one of the most famous Russian and world writers – we have chosen this year’s topic:

DOSTOEVSKY BEYOND LITERATURE AND HIS TIME: SCIENCE, POLITICS, PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

The eternal actuality of Dostoevsky lies in his ability to equipoise and (dis)balance different layers of insight into human existence – from metaphysics to Darwinism, from rationalism to nihilism and skepticism; from prophetic Christianism to a(nti)theism, and back. Among many other things, Dostoevsky shows how Darwinian notions of time, inheritance, variation and selection, as well as their influence on the development of narrative structure, could be counterpoised with narrative strategies of disrupting the predominant “evolutionary” plot structure.

We live in the world of rapid scientific and technological progress with real-life ethical issues that re-actualize Dostoevskian dilemma on how science might reconcile the seemingly contradictory truths that humans were subject to the determinism of natural laws but remained responsible for their actions and to some extent free.

“Every single organism exists on earth but to live - not to annihilate itself. Science has made this clear, and has laid down very precise laws upon which to ground the axiom. Humanity as a whole is, of course, no less than an organism. And that organism has, naturally, its own conditions of existence, its own laws” – writes Dostoevsky in his letter to N. L. Osmidov in February 1878. In the same letter, he introduces the concept of the “personal immortality” in connection to the famous dilemma – “Why am I to live decently and do good, if I die irrevocably here below?” The concept of “personal immortality” is defined as a capacity of an “I” to grasp “the idea of the universe and its laws. It is thanks to human capability of understanding that the ‘I’ is not only liberated from the earthly axioms, the earthly laws, but has its own law, which transcends the earthly.” (Letters of F. M. Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends 1821-1881, tr. E.C. Mayne, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1917, pp 233-234)

Profoundly interested in scientific discoveries, but skeptical about positivist science and its ability to “provide a new sense of unity and a new set of founding principles for the social organism, ones that are mathematically solid and unshakeable”, Dostoevsky is still able to provoke dispute on contemporary European politics with his insight into age-old European issues:

“It is this illusion of wholeness that the unhappy bourgeois (and many naive people in Europe as well) continue to accept as the living force of an organism, deceiving themselves with hope and at the same time trembling with fear and hatred. But in essence the integrity of the society has disappeared once and for all. The oligarchs are only concerned with the interests of the wealthy; democracy, only with the interests of the poor; but the interests of society, the interests of all and the future of France as a whole – no one there bothers about those things except the dreamer-socialists and the dreamer positivists who extol science and expect it to solve everything – that is, to provide a new sense of unity and a new set of founding principles for the social organism, ones that are mathematically solid and unshakeable. But science, in which people have so much faith, is scarcely capable of tackling this
matter right now. It's difficult to conceive that it already has sufficient knowledge of human nature to institute new laws of the social organism without making an error; and since this problem must be solved without hesitation or delay, the question arises of itself: is science prepared to undertake such a task at once, supposing that it is within its means as it develops in the future?” (F.M. Dostoevsky, “Meditations on Europe”, March 1876. In: The Diary of a Writer, tr. by B. Brasol, Charles Schribner’s Son’s, New York, 1919, pp. 401-402)

The contemporary issues connected to the future are focused on the politics of East-West relationship and the “dialectics” of interdependence. A number of major problems that endanger world stability and prosperity could be discussed by using Dostoevsky’s literary polyphony of social, political and philosophical views as a starting point for interdisciplinary conversations about social and environmental problems.

Many modern issues related to human consciousness and selfhood could also start from the analysis of Dostoevsky’s literature and a huge body of work devoted to him.