READING THE HISTORY OF THE FUTURE: EARLY SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET RUSSIAN SCIENCE FICTION

Introduction: From *Nauchnaia Fantastika* to Post-Soviet Dystopia

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Science fiction is the genre that links our lives to the future: the faster the pace of scientific and technological advancement, the greater our awareness of what István Csicsery-Ronay called "the science-fictionality" of everyday life.[1] The more we feel the effect of scientific and technological change on global flows of economic, social, and cultural exchange (not to mention the blurring of biological and environmental boundaries), the more we are drawn to a literature that Boris Strugatskii identified as "a description of the future, whose tentacles already reach into the present."[2] It is hardly surprising that scholarly interest in Russian and Soviet science fiction has been growing in recent years, with an expanding roster of roundtables and panels exploring the topic at professional conferences. Why talk about Soviet science fiction? As the articles in this special thematic cluster suggest, science fiction functions more as a field of intersecting discourses than as a clearly delineated genre: for readers of *Slavic Review,* it is a genre that foregrounds the interdisciplinary connections between the history of Soviet science and technology, political and economic development, and social and literary history. Science fiction, in short, offers a way to read the history of the future, with texts self-consciously oriented toward distant spatial and temporal horizons, even as they point insistently back to the foundational factors shaping the vectors of a society's collective imagination.

In the Soviet Union, science fiction certainly functioned as a vehicle for popular science education, even as it appealed to many Soviet readers who had a scientific background themselves. Even more important, during the Cold War, science fiction allowed many authors (most notably, Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii) a certain freedom in style and plot, while it also foregrounded Soviet achievements in science and space exploration, thus allowing both contact and competition with western science fiction writers. This combination of official and dissident potentials helps to explain science fiction's immense popularity in the Soviet Union. In fact, the political importance of science

1. István Csicsery-Ronay's seminal argument about science-fictionalality as a contemporary mode of awareness and response can be found in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2008; reprint, Middletown, 2011), 2.

2. Boris Strugatskii, interview, "Ot cheloveka razumnogo k cheloveku vospitannomu," published in *Chelovek bez granits*, at www.manwb.ru/articles/philosophy/filosofy_and_life/StrugatzInt_JulLuz/# (last accessed 1 March 2013).

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fiction as an alternative or subversive mode in Soviet literary life was thoroughly acknowledged in Cold War scholarship. Evgenii Zamiatin's *My* (We, 1920), Mikhail Bulgakov's *Sobach'e serdtse* (Heart of a Dog, 1925), and the Strugatskiis' main works all form part of any serious discussion about the worldwide development of twentieth-century dystopian literature and socio-philosophical science fiction. Thanks to Darko Suvin's groundbreaking 1979 book, *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, works by the Czech and Polish writers Karel Čapek and Stanisław Lem (widely available in Russian translations) also entered the scholarly conversation about science fiction at an early stage and have largely remained present there as names that even western scholars of the genre are obliged to mention.[3] Many authors and many ways of interpreting the importance of *nauchnaia fantastika* as a mode of Soviet (and post-Soviet) thinking have been left out of the discussion, however. We present this cluster of articles on Russian and Soviet science fiction with the hope of bringing more scholarly and readerly attention to some of the new theoretical perspectives and historical analyses that have recently emerged, thanks to more available archival material, a general broadening of global and comparative perspectives, and the advent of Russian post-Soviet fantastic literature with deep roots in Soviet science fiction.

Suvin's *Metamorphoses* offers a genealogy of science fiction that springs from the literature of utopia, so it is no surprise that early Soviet writers felt it was well suited to their new, idealistic, and technologically forward-thinking society. As the first two articles demonstrate, the alternative and non-utopian roots of science fiction in the adventure story let early Soviet writers continue to appeal to the growing readership—and, in the hands of A. N. Tolstoi, could eventually be turned against one particular category of science-fictional hero, the engineer. The third article in this cluster suggests that in many ways it is precisely the utopian strain in the best of Cold War–era Soviet science fiction that forms the background of much post-Soviet science fiction, casting its dystopian gloom into sharp relief.

If these articles stimulate your curiosity, you will find a growing body of recent work by the same authors and by other scholars in the field. Anindita Banerjee examines the emergence of prerevolutionary and early Soviet science fiction from a matrix of literary discourse and concerns about Russia's own status and future paths of development.[4] Kevin Reese's doctoral dissertation connects early Soviet programs for human and technological transformation to the best achievements of Cold War Soviet science fiction.[5] Eric Laursen considers science fictional villains along with the evil characters of other subversive genres in early Soviet literature.[6] Loren Graham's work on science and scientists in the Soviet Union offers vital information about the technological

3. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, 1979).

4. Anindita Banerjee, *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity* (Middletown, 2012).

5. Kevin Mitchell Reese, "Immortals Are Not Men: Mayakovskii, the Strugatskii Brothers, and the New Soviet Man" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, 2010).

6. Eric Laursen, *Toxic Voices: The Villain from Early Soviet Literature to Socialist Realism* (Evanston, 2013).

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and cultural context of literature related to science, especially science fiction, while more recently Nikolai Krementsov's *Martian Stranded on Earth* (on the early Bolshevik and pioneering science fiction author Aleksandr Bogdanov) and Asif Siddiqi's *Red Rockets' Glare*, among others, enrich our understanding of (respectively) the scientific and political theories of one important early author and the emergence of the Soviet space program, in part, from persuasive paraliterary narratives by authors such as rocketry pioneer Konstantin Tsiolkovskii.[7]

Matthias Schwartz's article, "How *Nauchnaia Fantastika* Was Made: The Debates about the Genre of Science Fiction from NEP to High Stalinism," asks us to reexamine flattering assumptions about nauchnaia fantastika's noble roots in the tradition of utopian, socially conscious literature on the one hand, and its stimulating connection to the "revolutionary dreams" and scientific progressivism of Bolshevik ideology on the other. Schwartz examines a rich trove of the available data—readership and circulation statistics, media debates, publishing house negotiations, and the unpopular (as well as popular) fiction of the period—that leads him to provocative insights about the scientifically slipshod and ideologically compromised origins of Soviet science fiction in popular adventure fiction and the "unmethodical, unfinished" nature of Stalinist literary production which never completely averted its eyes from what the general reading public actually wanted even as the norms of socialist realism were being established. As the first article in our cluster, Schwartz's article also demystifies the term itself: where, when, and how did "scientific fantastic" (*nauchnaia fantastika*) become the Russian designation of a genre that grew up in the west as "science fiction"? Schwartz explains how the tension between official and popular reception of scientific-adventure-fantasy stories could create an oscillating pattern in the genre's fortunes that does not quite match our commonly held assumptions about Stalinist literature and, in so doing, suggests an unusual literary trajectory for two of the most popular authors writing in the 1930s: Aleksandr Beliaev and Aleksei Tolstoi.[8]

Muireann Maguire, in her article "Aleksei N. Tolstoi and the Enigmatic Engineer: A Case of Vicarious Revisionism," examines three works by an author who successfully transformed himself from aristocratic émigré engineer into Soviet literary eminence, in part through composing and then tendentiously revising the novels *Aèlita* (1922–23) and *Giperboloid inzhenera Garina*

7. See, for example, Loren Graham, *The Ghost of the Executed Engineer: Technology and the Fall of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996); Nikolai Krementsov, *A Martian Stranded on Earth: Alexander Bogdanov, Blood Transfusions, and Proletarian Science* (Chicago, 2011); Asif Siddiqi, *The Red Rockets' Glare: Space Flight and the Soviet Imagination, 1857–1957* (Cambridge, Eng., 2010), as well as Siddiqi, *Sputnik and the Soviet Space Challenge* (Gainesville, 2003). A crucial earlier source for Russian science fiction in its societal context is Rosalind Marsh's *Soviet Fiction since Stalin: Science, Politics, and Literature* (Totowa, N.J., 1986).

8. See also several excellent papers and talks by Eric Laursen, for example, "Two Heads Are Better Than One: Rewriting Beliaev's Head of Professor Dowell" (paper, Science Fiction Research Association, Carefree, Arizona, June 2010). For an invaluable interdisciplinary perspective, see Nikolai Krementsov's "Off with Your Heads: Isolated Organs in Early Soviet Science and Fiction," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C* 40, no. 2 (June 2009): 87–100.

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(Engineer Garin's Death Ray, 1925–26). Maguire finds signs of the engineer's fraught status in both the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the first years of Iosif Stalin's dominance in an early draft of Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita* (1940, published 1966), and she ties editorial changes in various versions of Tolstoi's works to the worsening real-life position of members of his former profession in the Soviet Union. Engineers were not only educated professionals who might be skeptical of party plans and assertions; they were also the profession intended to imagine and then draft future projects, and this made them potential competitors with the party, even as it relied on their expertise to build its projects. Thus, Maguire's article suggests an uncanny parallel between the tragic transformation of the engineer from "hero" to "wrecker," in the Stalinist discourse of rapid industrialization, and the transformation of the engineer as literary hero turned malignant caricature in Tolstoi's rewritings. Her analysis also helps establish the backstory for the different, postwar trajectory of Soviet science fiction, which achieved its fullest aesthetic, intellectual, and popular development as a literary genre precisely at the moment when the engineer—especially the cybernetic and/or quantum engineer—was resurrected both as a vanguard social group and as the positive hero of popular science fiction in the 1960s.[9]

The third article in this cluster, Sofya Khagi's "One Billion Years after the End of the World: Historical Deadlock, Contemporary Dystopia, and the Continuing Legacy of the Strugatskii Brothers," approaches the question of science fiction from the far end of Soviet history. Khagi explicitly poses the question: why talk about Soviet science fiction now, decades after the collapse of the regime under which this literature acquired its particular features? Khagi turns our attention to some of the most prominent contemporary writers in Russia today—Garros-Evdokimov, Dmitrii Bykov, and Viktor Pelevin—and discovers their deep engagement with the Strugatskiis as they "dramatize . . . increasingly dark visions of modernization, progress, and morality." Khagi's interpretation of the Strugatskiis' legacy in contemporary letters and cultural life at large brings our thematic cluster full circle. The contemporary, post-Soviet literary scene begins to resemble the NEP era, as authors of mainstream repute (Zamiatin, Bulgakov or Bykov, Pelevin, for example) choose the genre of nauchnaia fantastika for some of their most significant works. Moreover, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, science fiction is once again written—and read—as a way to cope with the past and to try to forge a collective idea of the future. To Khagi's authors and their avid readers, the future looks bleak indeed—though many of its dark spots are common to all of global postmodernity. For these contemporary Russian authors, even the most apocalyptic musings of the Strugatskiis were backlit by a fundamental faith in the power of humanistic reason that is absent from their own direst twenty-first-century visions. Yet, as Khagi points out, they continue to talk

9. On the role of the Strugatskiis' "progressorism" in late Soviet science fiction and political life, see Il'ia Kukulin, "Alternative Social Blueprinting in Soviet Society of the 1960s and 1970s, or Why Left-Wing Political Practices Have Not Caught on in Contemporary Russia," *Russian Studies in History* 49, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 51–92.

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back to the Strugatskiis, as if seeking a way forward in the fact of the intertextual dialog itself.

We dedicate this cluster to the memory of Boris Natanovich Strugatskii, who died while we were preparing final drafts of the articles. His death marks the end of an era, though we hope it is just the beginning of the reading and study of his (and Arkadii Strugatskii's) works and their influence on later writers and cultural phenomena.

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