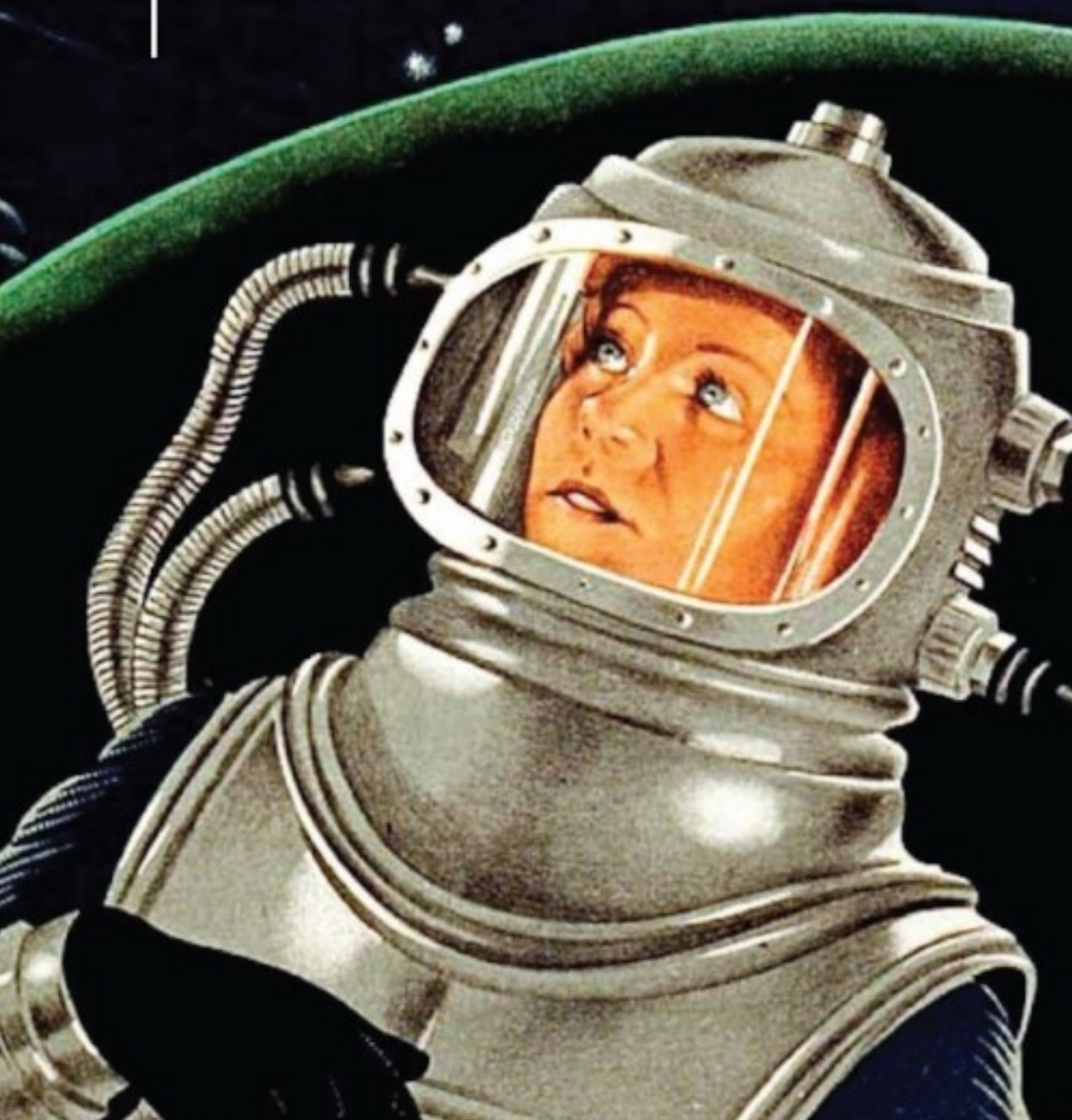




RUSSIAN SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE AND CINEMA

A Critical Reader

Edited and Introduced
by ANINDITA BANERJEE



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A Critical Reader

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SUMMARY

Since the dawn of the Space Age, when the Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite and sent the first human into the cosmos, science fiction literature and cinema from Russia has fascinated fans, critics, and scholars from around the world. Informed perspectives on the surprisingly long and incredibly rich tradition of Russian science fiction, however, are hard to come by in accessible form. This critical reader aims to provide precisely such a resource for students, scholars, and the merely curious who wish to delve deeper into landmarks of the genre, discover innumerable lesser-known gems in the process, and understand why science fiction came to play such a crucial role in Russian society, politics, technology, and culture for more than a century.

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Anindita Banerjee is an Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and a Faculty Fellow at the Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future at Cornell University. She is the author of *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity* (Wesleyan University Press, 2013), winner of the Science Fiction and Technoculture Studies Book Prize.

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**Edited and Introduced
by ANINDITA BANERJEE**

**Boston
2018**

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Introduction

A Possible Strangeness: Reading Russian Science Fiction on the Page and the Screen

ANINDITA BANERJEE

“A man is half of what he is, and half of what he wants to be,” said Oscar Wilde. If that is the case, then Soviet children of the sixties and seventies were all half cosmonauts. . . . The cosmos was everywhere, in school textbooks, on the walls of houses, on the mosaics in the Moscow metro. . . . Under the window of every five-story Khrushchev apartment stood miniature models of satellites. On the tear-off wall calendars, one spaceship followed another.

—Victor Pelevin, “Code of the World,” 2001¹

You could say that it all started with Sputnik. Sputnik, meaning “companion” in Russian, was the first artificial satellite to break free of the atmosphere and orbit the earth on October 4, 1957, almost a hundred years after Jules Verne wrote *First Men on the Moon* in 1865 and just one month ahead of the fortieth anniversary of the great utopian experiment of the October Revolution. Sputnik embodied a long-anticipated convergence of science fiction with science fact that reverberated across a planet still recovering from the ravages of

¹ Victor Pelevin, “Code of the World,” trans. Kirill Zikanov, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 28, 2001, accessed April 1, 2017, http://www.knigo.com/p/PELEWIN/code_world_engl.htm.

the Second World War, and, in the case of the Soviet Union, from three decades of domestic repression that had recently ended with the death of Josef Stalin in 1953. Though still locked in a Cold War with its geopolitical rival across the Atlantic, the country was entering an era of political, economic, and cultural liberalization at home, with calls for “coexistence” in the international arena under the new leader Nikita Khrushchev—a brief period called the Thaw that was named after a novel by Ilya Ehrenburg, a renowned public intellectual who had himself experimented with writing science fiction after the 1917 revolution.

The ridiculously small sphere orbiting the earth in 1957, twice the size of a soccer ball and weighing only eighty-four kilograms, carried an outsized symbolic weight. It ushered in a whole new way of imagining the self in relation to other worlds far beyond the geographical boundaries and historical travails of our imperfect planet. It embodied a dream cultivated by science fiction writers and technological visionaries that had remained tantalizingly out of humanity’s grasp. Most significantly, Sputnik brought everyday life into exhilaratingly close proximity with vast scales of space and time. Part of its appeal was its own accessibility: the satellite could be seen with the naked eye at dawn or dusk from anywhere on the earth’s surface, and emitted a chirping signal that could be captured on any short-wave radio. Its launch was the first of many “space firsts” that captivated the world’s imagination over the next decade. They included sending the first life form, the legendary dog Laika, on Sputnik II a mere month later; the successful return journey of the canine twins Belka and Strelka in 1960; Yuri Gagarin’s first manned mission in 1961; and the flight of Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, in 1963. Until the United States caught up with its own iconic moon landing in 1969, the Soviet Union drew the world into a thrilling participatory spectacle of future-thinking and future-making unfolding in real time.

Each breakthrough was broadcast live on radio and television, providing endless fodder for anticipation and speculation to commentators who adopted a distinctly science fictional tone. Newspapers and burgeoning popular science journals such as *Around the World* (*Vokrug sveta*), *Knowledge is Power* (*Znanie—Sila*), and the *Technology for youth* (*Tekhnika—molodezhi*), newly galvanized by the unfolding drama in outer space, vied for the pleasure of taking every reader along for a ride into the unfathomable.² As the contemporary writer and science fiction

2 For an overview of science fiction in periodical culture of the early Space Age, see Matthias Schwartz, *Die Erfindung des Kosmos. Zur sowjetischen Science Fiction und populärwissenschaftlichen Publizistik vom Sputnikflug bis zum Ende der Tauwetterzeit* [The discovery of the cosmos: On Soviet science fiction and popular science periodicals from the Sputnik launch to the end of the Thaw] (Frankfurt, 2003).

enthusiast Victor Pelevin so eloquently recalls, the cosmos—as outer space was called in Russian—literally came home through objects and narratives woven into daily commutes and evening playtimes, public art and domestic knickknacks. The infinite universe had become thoroughly intimate, generating its own economy of desire by virtue of its ubiquitous presence in the places and practices of everyday life. Saturating the material, intellectual, and imaginative worlds of both adults and children, the cosmos, like science fiction itself in Fredric Jameson’s famous formulation, had reached out and colonized reality.³

In the wake of Sputnik, Russia could also make a special historical claim to the condition that Pelevin describes as a foot in the real world and a foot in the cosmos—a mode of being, thinking, and acting that Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has called “the science fictionality of everyday life.”⁴ Soon after Gagarin’s flight, Khrushchev posthumously feted an obscure figure from the early twentieth century on the Red Square. Broadcast with much fanfare on national television and extensively written up in the press, the ceremony transformed Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, a rural teacher of mathematics who first popularized the term “cosmos” in the early 1900s, into the universally beloved grandfather of the Soviet Space Program. Tsiolkovsky stood out among his contemporary visionaries who, like their European and North American counterparts, were obsessed with the prospect of interplanetary communications and space travel. The biologist Alexander Bogdanov, for instance, in his novel *Red Star* (*Krasnaia zvezda*), imagined a Bolshevik utopia on Mars as early as 1908. The filmmaker Iakov Protazanov visualized a Soviet scientist landing on the red planet in *Aelita*, one of the earliest full-length science fiction films, in 1924. Tsiolkovsky’s prolific body of science fiction, however, served a further purpose: unlike the purely speculative conjectures of his contemporaries, it communicated the fundamentals of aerospace engineering to its audience. The mathematician wove prescient designs for jet-propulsion engines and gravity-free interiors into fantastical tales of space travel penned between 1895 and the 1920s.

Tsiolkovsky’s apotheosis also signaled the triumphant return of science fiction to Soviet life after nearly three decades of being marginalized from mainstream culture.⁵ It had been driven underground in the early 1930s

3 Fredric Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future?” *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 27 (1982): 149.

4 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 2.

5 On the media coverage of Tsiolkovsky’s public recognition and its impact on the relegitimation of science fiction, see Anindita Banerjee, “Between Sputnik and Gagarin: Space

when socialist realism came to be officially endorsed by the state as the only viable kind of art for a revolutionary society; according to an apocryphal but frequently cited account, Stalin himself had forbidden speculation beyond the realistic horizons of the near future.⁶ Under the twin signs of the Space Age and the Thaw, however, enthusiasts of the cosmos began to rediscover and reclaim an earlier golden era of *nauchnaia fantastika* or “scientific fantasy.” The Russian term for science fiction, which had first emerged in the 1890s and become increasingly popular in the period leading up to the October Revolution, once again began to appear on the pages of magazines, the cover of books, and in titles and credits on the big screen.⁷ In 1962, a journal called *Fantastika* was launched for catering to aficionados of the genre, which reprinted works from the revolutionary era alongside contemporary publications. The same year, a lavish new film returned to Alexander Beliaev’s bestselling novel from 1928, *The Amphibian Man* (*Chelovek-amfibii*), for plunging its Space Age audience into another unfathomable, little-explored dimension: the depths of the ocean.⁸

The science fictionality of everyday life that Pelevin associates with his childhood no doubt primed readers and moviegoers for a veritable flood of novels, stories, and films that continue to be venerated as exemplars of the genre to this day. They included *The Andromeda Nebula* (*Tumannost’ Andromedy*), Ivan Efremov’s saga about intergalactic socialism published almost simultaneously with the Sputnik launch in 1957; the prolific fiction of the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, whose work through the 1960s and ’70s deeply engaged with the mysteries of cutting-edge technological developments yet was palpably critical of their social and political uses; and Andrei Tarkovsky’s cinematic masterpieces *Solaris* (1972), lauded as a response to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and his later film *Stalker* (1979), set in an ambiguously alien wasteland adapted from the Strugatskys’ novel *The Roadside Picnic*. Science fiction, moreover, provided a potent platform for reaching out to the world, not just among the Soviet Union’s allies

Flight, Children’s Periodicals, and the Circle of Imagination,” *Children’s Literature in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova (New York: Routledge, 2008), 74–75.

6 Matthias Schwartz, “How *Nauchnaia Fantastika* was Made: The Debates about the Genre of Science Fiction from the NEP to High Stalinism,” *Slavic Review* 72, no. 2 (2013): 224–46.

7 Anindita Banerjee, *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 1–9.

8 *Chelovek-Amfibii* [The human amphibian], dir. Vladimir Chebotarev, Leningrad, 1962.

in the Eastern Bloc but also farther afield in the West and among the newly decolonized nations of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Progress Publishers of Moscow released a selection of Tsiolkovsky's essays, notes, and interviews in English in 1970.⁹ Tarkovsky's mystifying films won multiple awards at Cannes and elicited much commentary from Kubrick fans worldwide. Throughout the sixties and the seventies, Progress translated contemporary authors as well as selected early-twentieth-century luminaries of science fiction for distribution in many languages and regions.

Sputnik's impact—crossing the boundaries of private life and public culture, domestic enthusiasm and international curiosity, technological spectacle and participatory entertainment, contemporary aspirations and historical visions, and, last but not least, the diverse media of print, film, radio, and television—played an instrumental role in transforming science fiction from Russia into a serious object of study. The opening essay of this reader, arguably the first work on Russian science fiction published in English with an extensive bibliography, was penned in 1971 during the peak of the space fever on both sides of the Cold War. Its author, the Croatian-born literary theorist Darko Suvin, advanced the first theory of the genre in his 1979 book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* and became a founding figure of the field of science fiction studies worldwide.¹⁰ With the tantalizing phrase “a possible strangeness,” Suvin's contribution sets the stage for understanding why Russian science fiction continued to attract an ever-widening field of scholars and critics over the subsequent decades, even and especially after the Space Age lost its heady fervor and the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist in 1991. The contents and organization of this critical reader reflect the ways in which the Space Age provided both the momentum and the template, much as it had done with the figure of Tsiolkovsky himself, for critics to simultaneously reach backward and forward in time.¹¹ Their endeavors recover a surprisingly long history of the genre in Russian literature and cinema, in the process revealing a dizzyingly diverse array of formal innovations and thematic preoccupations.

Research on the topic took on a new urgency in the 1980s, when it first became clear that the almost century-long living experiment of creating a

9 Konstain Tsiolkovsky, *The Call of the Cosmos*, trans. V. Danko (Moscow, 1970).

10 Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

11 The first historical study of *nauchnaia fantastika* in Russian, published five years after Suvin's seminal essay, was A. N. Britikov's *Russkii-sovetskii nauchno-fantasticheskii roman* [Russian and Soviet science fiction novels] (Moscow, 1976).

utopian alternative to Western industrial capitalism was coming to a close.¹² Under the banner of perestroika and glasnost, several key authors and works that had been suppressed or merely retreated into oblivion were resurrected, reissued, translated, and studied for the first time within and beyond Russia's borders. Bogdanov's *Red Star*, which after its initial success fell into disfavor among Bolsheviks at least in part because of V. I. Lenin's condemnation of its "mystical tendencies," and Protazanov's *Aelita*, which was commercially successful but ideologically suspect in the eyes of the new Soviet commissars, attracted renewed attention from critics and translators. Among other rediscovered early classics were Mikhail Bulgakov's short story *The Fatal Eggs* (*Rokovye iaitsa*) and the novel *Heart of a Dog* (*Sobach'e serdtse*): of these satires about the grand experiment of forging a New Soviet Man in Russia's roaring twenties, the first was published in 1925, while the second appeared in print only in 1987. A similarly uneven publication history lay behind the return to print of the highly experimental early science fiction of Andrei Platonov, a hydrologist and engineer who participated in the Bolshevik project of transforming a largely agrarian country into a technological trailblazer. Evgenii Zamiatin's *We* (*My*), a dystopian novel written in 1921, did not appear in its original language until the late 1980s despite, or perhaps because of, having inspired George Orwell's *1984*. This work is perhaps the most famous example of a sciencefiction text that has been mined endlessly for a key not just to Russia's turbulent relationship with the twentieth century, but to the modern human condition as a whole.

Critical readings of Russian science fiction have continued to grow exponentially since then, and not just within the traditional disciplinary boundaries of literary and cinema studies. The essays collected in this volume confirm what became palpably evident in the Sputnik era: a genre that is perpetually poised, like Pelevin's child-cosmonaut, at the threshold between what is and what could be is not a product of the writer's study or a filmmaker's studio

12 Among the foundational studies emerging from this period are Leonid Heller, *De la Science-fiction soviétique: Par delà le dogme* [Soviet science fiction: Some thoughts on ideology] (Lausanne, 1979); John Griffiths, *Three Tomorrows: American, British, and Russian Science Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980); and Patrick McGuire, *Red Star: Political Aspects of Soviet Science Fiction* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Institute, 1985). 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall saw another wave of scholarly interest, exemplified by Richard Stites's *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Visions and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Yvonne Howell's *Apocalyptic Realism: The Strugatsky Brothers' Science Fiction* (Middlebury, VT: Russian and East European Studies in the Aesthetics and Philosophy of Culture, 1994).

Tarkovsky, Solaris, and Stalker

STEPHEN DALTON

Dalton, Stephen. "Andrei Tarkovsky, Solaris and Stalker: The Making of Two Inner-Space Odysseys." The BFI. December 31, 2014. <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/tarkovsky/>. Accessed February 27, 2017.

Andrei Tarkovsky was not a fan of science fiction. When pressed on the subject, the grand master of Soviet Russian cinema dismissed the SF genre for its "comic book" trappings and vulgar commercialism. The son of a poet, Tarkovsky was an uncompromising visionary who dreamed of making films that combined the devotional majesty of medieval icon painting, the symphonic beauty of Bach and the moral weight of Dostoevsky. Even so, Tarkovsky still happened to make two of the most revered and visually ravishing SF epics in the modern cinematic canon. Bookending the 1970s, *Solaris* and *Stalker* are epic inner-space odysseys with more in common than just the same director. Both were based on cult novels. Both share key cast and crew members. And both are cryptic cautionary fables about men who boldly go to the outer limits of human knowledge, where they encounter alien entities that can read their minds and grant their deepest desires. So be careful what you wish for.

A deeply religious man who believed great art should have a higher spiritual purpose, Tarkovsky was an exacting perfectionist not given to humour or humility. His signature style was ponderous, verbose, and literary. But he turned to science fiction almost as career salvation, to get himself out of a fix with the Soviet film authorities. *Solaris* came about after his previous feature *Andrei Rublev* had been denied a domestic release, while his next submitted script was deemed too bourgeois and personal by the doctrinaire ideologues of Goskino, the USSR State Committee for Cinematography. That screenplay was shelved, later to resurface as *Mirror*.

Instead, Tarkovsky proposed a film version of Polish author Stanislaw Lem's philosophical 1961 SF novel *Solaris*, reasoning that a futuristic thriller set on board a remote space station would prove populist enough even for

the censorious commissars of Soviet cinema. He was right. A small-screen adaptation had already aired on Russian television, which also helped his pitch. Endorsed by Lem, the director and Fridrikh Gorenshtein completed their first script in 1969, shifting two-thirds of the action to Earth. But the changes angered both Lem and the Mosfilm studio committee, so Tarkovsky produced a second draft more faithful to the novel. The project received official approval from Goskino in the summer of 1970. Lem's compact novel begins with psychologist Kris Kelvin arriving on a space station floating close to the surface of Solaris, a planet covered by a vast sentient ocean with the disturbing power to read human minds and reproduce perfect copies of their deepest memories, like a giant 3-D printer with the godlike ability to replicate life itself. Sent to assess whether the station should be closed down, Kelvin is thrown into emotional turmoil when confronted with a doppelganger of his ex-wife Hari, who committed suicide years before.

Tarkovsky's film diverges from Lem's space-set yarn with a long preamble set on Earth. Played by the brawny, soulfully brooding Lithuanian actor Donatas Banionis, Kelvin is introduced in an idyllic country landscape as he bids farewell to his parents at their lakeside dacha. These languid close-up shots of water and nature are pure Tarkovsky, recurring like musical motifs through his body of work. At the dacha, Kelvin also consults with Berton (Vladislav Dvorzhetsky), a discredited astronaut who once witnessed disturbing hallucinations on the surface of Solaris. The retired spaceman later sends further cryptic warnings via videolink from his car as it speeds through an ultra-modern city, which is nameless but clearly shot in Tokyo. Like *Blade Runner* a decade later, *Solaris* takes contemporary Japan as a template for the high-tech urban future. Switching between color and monochrome, this long and largely wordless sequence is set to Eduard Artemyev's ominous electronic score. This again is classic Tarkovsky: hypnotic vistas unfolding at real-time speed in lengthy, unbroken shots.

Arriving on board the shabby and battered space station, Kelvin finds the surviving human crew to be obstructive and erratic. But his own coolly rational self-belief is soon shaken when Solaris sends him an uncanny double of his late wife Hari (Natalya Bondarchuk). Kelvin initially manages to eject the phantom from the space station, but Solaris keeps conjuring up further copies, exacerbating his long-buried guilt over her suicide. Given a second chance, he tries to save Hari, but the tragedy repeats itself over and over. At this point, the story spills over from scientific puzzle into psychological horror movie. "True horror is in having to watch someone you love destroy herself," writes author

and critic Philip Lopate in his liner notes to Criterion's deluxe 2011 DVD release, stressing the thematic parallels between *Solaris* and Hitchcock's *Vertigo*: "the inability of the male to protect the female, the multiple disguises or resurrections of the loved one, the inevitability of repeating past mistakes."

Adding an extra frisson of autobiography, Tarkovsky initially planned to cast his ex-wife Irma Rausch as Hari. He then changed his mind, signing Swedish star Bibi Andersson, former muse to his directing idol Ingmar Bergman. But finally he settled on Bondarchuk, the young Russian beauty who had first introduced him to Lem's novel. Hari's death scenes gained extra resonance in 2010 when Bondarchuk revealed she had an affair with Tarkovsky during the shoot, and attempted to kill herself after they split in 1972. One of the sly ironies of *Solaris* is that the human visitors come to study Solaris, but the planet ends up studying *them*. Dense with scientific speculation, Lem's novel is essentially about the impossibility of communicating with any alien life forms that mankind might find in deep space. But the film is a much more personal story about guilt, shame and the search for some divine pattern at work in the cosmos. As usual with Tarkovsky, the story takes on an explicitly religious dimension.

Lem disliked Tarkovsky's interpretation, accusing him of making *Crime and Punishment* in space. But there is crossover between book and film. A scathing speech by one of the station's crew appears in both: "We don't want to conquer the cosmos, we want to extend the boundaries of Earth to the cosmos. We are only seeking Man. We don't want other worlds, we want mirrors." While the novel ends on an ambivalent note, the film has one of the most haunting final twists in SF cinema. Crushed by guilt and grief over Hari, Kelvin returns to his parents in the idyllic country house seen in the opening scenes—but this comforting illusion is just a giant replica created by the planet-sized brain of Solaris. It looks like home, but Kelvin can never go home again. "The characters in *Solaris* were dogged by disappointments, and the way out we offered them was illusory enough," Tarkovsky later wrote in his cinematic memoir *Sculpting in Time*. "It lay in dreams, in the opportunity to recognise their own roots—those roots which forever link man to the Earth which bore him. But even those links had become unreal for them."

Predictably, the first cut of *Solaris* provoked the Soviet censors, who ordered Tarkovsky to remove all references to God and Christianity. The director stood his ground, only conceding to minor edits. He was rewarded with his first international breakthrough hit, winning the Grand Jury Prize in Cannes and earning a cult following in the west. At home in Russia, the film

stayed on limited release for fifteen years, selling more than 10 million tickets. Moscow's propaganda machine hailed *Solaris* as a superior Soviet riposte to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Tarkovsky was certainly scornful of Stanley Kubrick's psychedelic SF epic, calling it "a lifeless schema with only pretensions to truth," devoid of depth or human emotion.

"For some reason, in all the science-fiction films I've seen, the filmmakers force the viewer to examine the details of the material structure of the future," Tarkovsky told Russian film journalist Naum Abramov in 1970. "More than that, sometimes, like Kubrick, they call their own films premonitions. It's unbelievable! Let alone that *2001: A Space Odyssey* is phoney on many points even for specialists. For a true work of art, the fake must be eliminated." Such fighting talk was partly standard Cold War rhetoric, of course, and partly the egomania that drives most great film directors. On reflection, Lopate claims in his Criterion essay, the rival cosmic visions of Kubrick and Tarkovsky actually have much in common. "Hindsight allows us to observe that the two masterworks are more cousins than opposites," he writes. "Both set up their narratives in a leisurely, languid manner, spending considerable time tracking around the space sets; both employ a widescreen *mise-en-scène* approach that draws on superior art direction; and both generate an air of mystery that invites countless explanations." But nothing dates faster than yesterday's vision of the future, of course, and Tarkovsky's space opera has not aged as gracefully as Kubrick's. The garish interior of the *Solaris* space station, designed by Mikhail Romadin, now looks alarmingly like an Austin Powers bachelor pad. The churning ocean beneath—made with acetone, aluminium powder and dyes—also radiates a threadbare Hammer Horror cheapness. Ironically, Tarkovsky's earlier films still feel more timeless and contemporary than *Solaris*, perhaps because the director treated the futuristic setting like a superfluous detail.

"Unfortunately the science fiction element in *Solaris* was nonetheless too prominent and became a distraction," Tarkovsky wrote in *Sculpting in Time*. "The rockets and space stations—required by Lem's novel—were interesting to construct; but it seems to me now that the idea of the film would have stood out more vividly and boldly had we managed to dispense with these things altogether." Later in the decade, Tarkovsky would return to his dream of a philosophical SF epic that transcended genre entirely. His final domestic feature before exiling himself to western Europe was *Stalker*, freely adapted from the 1971 novel *Roadside Picnic* by the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, a dark satire which had been heavily censored by the Soviet authorities.

The Antiutopia Factory: The Dystopian Discourse in Russian Literature in the Mid-2000s

ALEKSANDR CHANTSEV

Chantsev, Aleksandr. "The Antiutopia Factory: The Dystopian Discourse in Russian Literature in the Mid-2000s." *Russian Studies in Literature* 45, no. 2 (2009): 6–41.

What is demanded ... is the explicit, conscious, and consciously self-justifying attempt to devalue the uppermost values, to depose them as highest values. At the same time, this implies a decision to take seriously the intermediate state that the devaluation of the highest values produces, by simultaneously fixing on our earthly world as the only reality, and a decision *to be* in that decision as a historical one. Nihilism is now no longer a historical process that we as observers merely have before us, outside ourselves, or even behind us; nihilism reveals itself as the history of our era, which imposes its own effective limits on the age, and by which we are claimed.

—Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche and the Void* [Nitssh e i pustota]¹

[P]olitical activities, of all those in public life the most efficient and the most visible, are the final product of others more intimate, more

1 M. Khaidegger [Martin Heidegger], "Evropeiskii nihilizm," in Khaidegger, *Nitssh e i pustota*, uncredited translation into Russian (Moscow: Algoritm/Eksmo, 2006), n.p. [Quotation from Heidegger's *Nietzsche*, vol. 4: *Nihilism*, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 48. Emphasis in the English original. Page references for later citations from this edition are given below in square brackets. —Trans.]

impalpable. Hence, political indocility would not be so grave did it not proceed from a deeper, more decisive intellectual indocility.

—José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*¹

Due to the deterioration of the political climate and the transformation of political consciousness in this country's literature ("high" literature, "mainstream" literature, and "trash" literature simultaneously) some rather strange processes have recently begun. In the 1990s and the early 2000s, mainstream literature in Russia was basically trying to erase various historical traumas (beginning with the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War [1918–21], extending through the reconceptualization of World War II, and ending with the Gulag and the disintegration of the USSR) and stressing apocalyptic ideas (Pavel Krusanov's *Bite of an Angel* [Ukus angela] and Vladimir Sorokin's *Ice* [Led]). Now a slew of fictional works has arisen, literally before our eyes, in which the imagination explores the near political future.

Books that, to one degree or another, follow this trend—whose novelistic form originated with Dmitrii Bykov's *The Evacuator* [Evakuator]—include Sergei Dorenko's *2008*, Ol'ga Slavnikova's *2017*, Bykov's *ZhD*, *The Hostage* [Zalozhnik] by Aleksandr Smolenskii and Eduard Krasnianskii, and Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* [Den' oprichnika].² All these books, qualitatively diverse as they may be, have captured the public's attention, won literary awards,³ received critical attention,⁴ and been eagerly discussed in the press.

1 Kh. Ortega-i-Gasset [José Ortega y Gasset], *Vosstanie mass*, trans. A.M. Geleskul and S.L. Vorob'ev (Moscow, 1991). [Quotation from José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1932, 1960), 67. —Trans.]

2 Dmitrii Bykov, *Evakuator* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2005); Sergei Dorenko, *2008* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2005); Ol'ga Slavnikova, *2017* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2006); Bykov, *ZhD* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2006); Aleksandr Smolenskii and Eduard Krasnianskii, *Zalozhnik* (*Operatsiia "Memorandum"*) (Moscow: Vagrius, 2006); Vladimir Sorokin, *Den' oprichnika* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2006). See also the recently released *Rublevka Fortified District* [Ukrepraion "Rublevka"] (Moscow: Vagrius, 2006). Our selection holds to the chronological principle overall, while sometimes sacrificing chronology to thematic consistency, especially since the chosen titles were published only a few months apart.

3 Notably Slavnikova's novel, which was a Great Book [Bol'shaia kniga] finalist, won the 2006 Russian Booker and the Student Booker for 2006, and was picked by *Knizhnoe obozrenie* as the best book-length prose published in Russia for 2006.

4 Liza Novikova, commenting on Bykov's *ZhD* and Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik*, was the first to juxtapose these two works in terms of their evident thematic kinship ("two satirical treatises, two verdicts passed on our reality"). See L. Novikova, "Knigi za nedeliu" [Books of

That would probably not have happened had they dealt only with calculatedly ripped-from-the-headlines, sure-bet scandals (although they all, in one way or another, touch on the “2008 problem”—whether or not Putin would step down from the presidency and who would be selected as his successor), this epidemic spread of “election campaign” motifs in literature is proof of how timely and, at the same time, how painful the topic of the country’s near future is to the public mind.

Furthermore, the exploration of identical problems by authors on opposite sides of the literary and social field (Smolenskii, the former banker and oligarch, and Bykov, the writer and journalist sounding off with his antiliberal slogans; Slavnikova, the representative of “pure” literature, and Minaev, the “glitzy” writer/businessman) should be perceived as highly indicative: these books appeared in 2006 and 2007, in a veritable avalanche. The witty forecast of a critic summing up the previous year and predicting the next—“we may also expect the market to be flooded with novels that in one way or another ‘anticipate’ the parliamentary and presidential elections. The spate of antiutopias and political treatises that swept over fiction in this country during 2006 will not ebb in the coming year”⁵—was borne out, if only by the fact that Sergei Minaev’s novel, much touted as a potential bestseller (Minaev’s previous production, the novel *Soulless* [Dukhless] really had been a bestseller in 2006), was given the telling title *Media sapiens: A Tale of a Third Term* [Media sapiens. Povest’ o tret’em sroke].⁶ Due to this “descent” of the dystopian discourse into mass literature, we may say that Alvin Toffler’s famous call to build “utopia factories” has been successfully realized, except that this country has characteristically switched negative for positive, with the result that what has actually gone up, right before our eyes, is an “antiutopia factory.”⁷

In pondering why this set of problems is so socially timely, the following questions must be answered. Why have futurological prognoses geared to the imminent supplanted the erasure of historical traumas in literature? Why has the topic of abstract apocalypse in works published in the 1990s and early in this century been replaced by concrete though downright pessimistic

the week], *Kommersant*”, no. 155 (3486) (August 23, 2006), available at www.kommersant.ru/doc.html?DocID=699575 [all URLs accessed December 2008—Ed.].

5 A. Miroshkin, “Strategiia schast’ia” [Strategies of happiness], *Knizhnoe obozrenie* [Book review] no. 1 (2007): 4.

6 Sergei Minaev, *Media sapiens. Povest’ o tret’em sroke* (Moscow: AST, 2007).

7 Minaev’s opus won the 2006 “SNAFU” [Polnyi abzats], *Knizhnoe obozrenie*’s “anti-prize” for the worst book of the year, and that award was well earned.

forecasts? How is literature generally trying to handle the current situation, in which public policy is going away and the political is being transformed and sublimated in contemporary Russia?

These questions are directly linked to the genre definition of the works under examination here. The most accurate way to define these sociopolitical phantasms, one supposes, would be as dystopias, but as a far from classical type of dystopia.⁸ The first thing that leaps out at us is that these works, while maintaining the form of dystopian forewarning and orientation toward the future, actually deal with the present: “fantasy is a means of mentally rationalizing the very principles of social organization in the form of a hypothetical war, enmity, competition. . . . Following the powerful lead of certain cultural groups, it presents as a mode of intellectual control over the problems of social change and the pace and direction of the social dynamic, and as a conditional aesthetic reaction to the problems arising therein.”⁹ The element of satire inherent in dystopias is present and even exaggerated in certain writers (Sergei Dorenko’s rendition of our heads of state is likely to elicit a squeamish disgust even in those who have never counted themselves among their admirers), but something key is missing. Not one of these books offers an even remotely recognizable plan for a *positive* future; the plan found, exceptionally, in Slavnikova’s *2017* is in fact a reprise of the distant past (the 1917 Revolution). This brings the works under examination here into close juxtaposition with the Aleksandr Garros and Aleksei Evdokimov collection of stories *Juche* [Chuchkhe], whose action is set in the near future but also encompasses the events of several past years (the Yukos debacle, for example), while its fierce polemical critique and its denial of the present comes without so much as a hint that Garros and Evdokimov have a program of their own for positive development in the country.¹⁰

As we can see, in examining Slavnikova’s novel, in which a “revolution in masquerade” erupts in 2017, replaying the revolution of a century earlier, it may be said that we are dealing with a denial of history: “In history, this process [the revival by force of great events from the past—A. C.] is called

8 Since the interpretation of such terms as “ectopia,” “practopia,” “cacotopia,” and “contratopia” has yet to be settled, we shall employ the possibly less nuanced but more distinct “utopia/dystopia” dichotomy.

9 B. Dubin, *Slovo—pis'mo—literatura: ocherki po sotsiologii sovremennoi kul'tury* [Word, writing, literature: Essays on the sociology of modern culture] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001), 27.

10 Aleksandr Garros and Aleksei Evdokimov, eds., *Chuchkhe* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2006). For further detail, see A. Chantsev, “Vita nova gadkikh lebedei,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 82 (2006): 423–30.

restoration: it is a process of the denial of history and the antievolutionist revival of earlier models.”¹¹ The denial of history is projected into the future, thereby spilling over into a negation of that future: consequently, these books cannot possibly be regarded as works of futurology.

Utopian literature—and dystopian literature, too, by and large—appears when society becomes certain that the current situation can survive the long haul and is manifestly apt only to deteriorate in the future, while the individual is beset by a sense of alienation from any involvement in history. In that sense, the novels we examine here are nothing but a natural documentation of frustrated resentment and society’s predominant confusion in the present political situation, and their popularity is evidently associated with the way in which they satisfy the need of Russia’s readership for utopian catastrophilia. The emotional coloration of that need brings with it more than a whiff of scandal, being akin to a fascination for the tabloids’ description of sundry gory events. None of these authors goes beyond the transmission of that catastrophilia. Without even attempting to propose their own plans for the future, they substitute instead a critique of the present, extrapolating the current situation into the future and adopting what is in essence an escapist stance. These works thus undoubtedly take on the formal features of the dystopian genre, but that does not make them pure dystopias, because a real dystopia—in its implicit, maximally coded, or apophatic form—entails at least the hint of a “brighter future,” of *how things should be*.¹²

These authors are wholly invested in producing a caustic treatise (Bykov in *ZhD*, Prokhanov in *The Motorship “Joseph Brodsky”* [Teplokhod Iosif Brodskii], and Dorenko in *2008*), have a fine touch in describing various technologies, both “physical” (the fantastically cyberpunk gadgets described in Sorokin’s novella) and “political” (technologies to shape public opinion and manage

11 Zh. Bodriiär [Jean Baudrillard], *Obshchestvo potrebleniia* [Consumer society] (Moscow: Respublika/Kul’turnaia revoliutsiia, 2006), 132. [Quotation from an uncredited translation of Baudrillard’s *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 99. Page references for the following citations from this edition are given below, in square brackets. —Trans.]

12 “Some will explain the emphasis on social interaction and politics in contemporary Russian literature as showing that Russia is healing, is concentrating, is Acquiring Ideas.” Thus Sergei Shargunov, political figure and writer, comments on works by Sergei Dorenko, Aleksandr Prokhanov, and Zakhar Prilepin (“Dom mod uveshan flagami” [Fashion house decorated with flags], *Ex Libris NG*, July 20, 2006, http://exlibris.ng.ru/subject/2006-07-20//1_house.html). But in our view, it can equally well be proof of the opposite, of a situation so burdensome and so explosive that one has a constant desire to discuss it.