Russian And East European Science Fiction

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vansished. My eyes, a thousand eyes, gazed upwards, at the Machine. There—the third, iron gesture of that inhuman hand. Shaking in an unseen wind, the criminal makes his current, lowers. An unbearably sharp, cutting beam every thousands of volts. What a magnificent charge!

And thus I could not write. All of this has been carved into me, engraved forever, especially this unilenable beyond the Green Wall. The only beauty is reasonable day. I went down to the attendant to obtain a certificate. From the Botanical Museum, of course. I personally have nothing was over. This was, it seemed to me, the same, silent cold, found in the mute, black space between planets. You must understand, I didn’t want... I mumbled. I tried, with all my strength...

I sat on the floor near the bed, the cold, despairing floor. I sat in silence. Agonizing cold came from below; everything was over. This was, it seemed to me, the same, silent cold, found in the mute, black space between planets. “You must understand, I didn’t want...” I mumbled. “I tried, with all my strength...”

It was true; I really didn’t want to. And everything else, every word I said to her. But how to explain to her, that iron doesn’t want to, but the law, inevitable and precise...

My hair was on the hand. The hand gripped the fiery sphere pointing downwards. But I couldn’t tell her why, what I had done; it would have made her an accomplice to my crimes, and I knew that she didn’t have the strength to go the Bureau of Guardians, so consequently...

O lay down, I slowly kissed her, kissing the sweet, plumpe cress in her wrist. Her blue eyes were closed, and that pink half moon slowly blossomed, melting, as I kissed her everywhere.

Suddenly I felt clearly how empty and devastated I was, how I had been cast off. I couldn’t—it wasn’t possible. I must, but I couldn’t. My lips froze.

The pink half moon trembled, faded, convulsed. O threw the cover over herself, cocooned in the bed, her face buried in the pillow.

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It was true; I really didn’t want to. And everything else, every word I said to her. But how to explain to her, that iron doesn’t want to, but the law, inevitable and precise...

O raised her face from the pillow and, without opening her eyes, said “Go away,” but through her tears it sounded like “goway,” and for some reason that absurd, childish trifle broke my heart.

My whole being was freezing, pierced with the cold. I left, walking out into the corridor. Through the glass I could see a light, barely perceptible wispy of smoke. At night, the smoke would descend, attaching to everything. But the elevator was already descending, down, down, down...

O slipped past me silently, to the elevator. There was a knock on the door.

“One minute,” I cried, frightened.

But the elevator was already descending, down, down, down...
She had taken R from me.
She had taken O from me.
And yet, and yet...
defrosted in a sterile socialist future). There are echoes of Fyodorov even in high Modernists like poet Evgenii Zamyatyn (1884-1937) was educated as a naval engineer and joined the Bolsheviks before the 1905 Revolution; his political interests led to years in provincial exile, which sparked his career as a writer. His classic dystopian novel We is perhaps still the best known work of Russian SF. Written in 1919-21, We was one of the first literary works banned in the Soviet Union and, oddly enough, was first published in English translation in 1924. (It was first officially published in the USSR only in 1988—three years before the USSR itself ended.) We had a formative influence on N. Tolstoy (1883-1945), “the Red Count,” and Alexei N. Tolstoy (1883-1945), “the Red Count,” and Orlov’s 1984 (1948); it depicts a regimented society whose members have numbers rather than names, and where a brain operation ultimately “saves” the mathematician hero D-503 from the wiles of revolution. We is often read as a prophetic anti-Bolshevik dystopia, but in fact many negative elements in the novel are drawn from Zamyatyn’s experience of English society, where he lived during WWI, designing icebreakers for the Russian navy. Zamyatyn was unable to publish under Stalin; he was allowed to emigrate in 1931 and died in Paris after years of literary silence.

Other early Soviet authors produced important SF: Alexander Tolstoy (1900-1953), “the Red Count,” wrote the novel Aelita, the basis of one of the first (perhaps the first) full-length SF films, Yakov Protazanov’s Aelita: Queen of Mars (1924). Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940), now best known for his plays and the novel The Master and Margarita, wrote several works of SF, including “The Fatal Eggs” (1925) and the novel Heart of a Dog (written 1925; officially published in the USSR in 1987). In “The Fatal Eggs” a scientist’s discovery plus political interference cause disaster, as a mysterious Red Ray turns reptile and ostrich eggs into super-fertile monsters—but the tale also depicts the devious mechanism of celebrity in a very near future (it is set in 1929, imagining that Lenin’s New Economic Policy had been hobbled Soviet genetics and agriculture for decades, and Lamarckian theories and political machinations hobbled Soviet genetics and agriculture for decades, to an Andrei Sakharov, the nuclear physicist who became a Nobel Prize–winning dissident and human rights activist.) Educated citizens enjoyed reading popular science, and SF tended to be some of the best fiction available while socialist realism was still favored by the literary bureaucracy. Soviet citizens read SF and, for Ukrainians, Kyrgyz, and others (perhaps etc.), authors but also translations of classics (Verne, Wells) and writers from “brotherly” socialist countries (Capek, Lem). Some Anglo-American SF writers were widely available and very popular: Isaac Asimov (himself born in Russia), Arthur C. Clarke, and Ray Bradbury.

By the late 1950s a growing Soviet SF scene included gee-whiz magazines for boys and a growing number of writers producing mostly hard SF. The 95% that was bound to be crap was socialist realist crap, more idealist and less sexy than American style pulp SF. (Efremov’s Andromeda Galaxy, far from crap, still makes tedious reading today.) Showing a distant future meant that many of the platitudes of socialist realism could be dispensed with, and including characters whose names pointed to many nationalities could suggest either worldwide socialism or a science-based meritocracy of the future. The early achievements of the Soviet space program added excitement to plots of space travel—and honestly, isn’t cosmonaut (meaning someone who navigates the cosmos) a better term than astronaut (someone who sails into a star and gets vaporized)? SF may have been encouraged because it was another venue where the Soviet Union could compete with the West.

Besides the Strugatskys (see below) there were many other prominent SF authors in the USSR during the Thaw (1956-64) and the subsequent period of Stagnation: Chingiz Aitmatov, Genrikh Altov, Vladien Bakhnov, Dmitrii Bilinenk, Kir Bulychev, Anatoliy Dneprov, Mikhail Emtev, Sever Gansovsky, Gennadii Go, Mikhail Greshnov, Vladimir Grigoriev, Georgii Gurevich, Aleksandr Kazantsev, VIKtor Kolupaev, Anatoly Krapivin, Isai Lukodianov, Efremi Parnov, Aleksandr Poleschuk, Vladimir Savchenko, Viktor Separin, Vadim Shefner, Nikolai Toman, Ilya Varshavsky, Evgenii Voiskunsky, Roman Yarov, and Valentina Zhuravleva. Several works were adapted as films, including Aelita, Professor Dowe/l’s Head (from Distant Rainbow, 1992), and Aelita: Stalker (1979). The Strugatskys’ popularity extended far beyond SF fans; every member of the intelligentsia felt obliged to read works like Hard to Be a God.

Around the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, Western SF that had not previously been available came flooding into Russia (along with porn and pulp of all kinds), but local SF has continued to flourish alongside fantasy. Despite copious current production, however, the SF most available in English translation is by writers who write not only SF: Viktor Pelevin (OMON Ra), Valeri Sorokin (Ice and others), Mikhail Bulgakov (The Master and Margarita), Olga Slavnikova’s The Amphibian Man (2011), and Sergei Diachenko, Aleksandr Gromov, Sviatoslav Loginov, Sergei Lukyanenko, Genrikh Oldi (Dmitriy Gromov and Oleg Ladyzhynski), Nik Peruiov, Vlacheslav Rybakov, and Vladimir Vasilev. The prolific Lukyanenko (b. 1968) may be the most popular SF author in Russia today; his fantasy novels Night Watch (1998) and Day Watch (1999) were made into movies (2004 and 2006) that did well in North America, and he is increasingly well represented in English translation.

EAST EUROPEAN SF

Eastern Europe includes more than fifteen countries and languages (if you count Belarus and Ukraine). Before WWI, it was almost all under one or another empire, Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, or Russian; local cultural production tended to favor the protection of the national language and folklore. After WWI, however, SF appealed to many aspiring writers who sought an audience and started to build the new national literatures. The best-known interwar Eastern European SF writer was the Czech Karl
Čapek (1890–1938), inventor of the word “robot” (or at last first user: he said it was his brother’s idea). It comes from the Czech word robota (the kind of unpaid work serfs would do). Čapek’s 1920 play R.U.R. (Rossum’s Universal Robots) is still regularly performed—and the nefarious Rossum Corporation makes an appearance in Joss Whedon’s series Dollhouse. Much of Čapek’s collection’s writing was not SF, but the 1936 speculative novel War with the Newts is both delightfully funny and pointedly critical of the flaws of human societies, which all exploit the newly discovered sentient newts until the newts take over. When the Nazis entered Czechoslovakia in 1938 Čapek was #2 on their list of enemies, but he thwarted plans to arrest and intern him by dying of pneumonia on December 25, 1938.

After WWII most of Eastern Europe was in the Soviet orbit, and SF was popular in many East European countries for the same reasons as in the USSR: it allowed a certain freedom from stultifying socialist realism. Josef Nesvadba (1926–2005) in Czechoslovakia incorporated numerous generic traits into SF while retaining a skeptical outlook. The Lost Face is available in English translation, Stanislav Lem (1921–2006) did not consider himself a SF author, but he is the outstanding SF author of the period. His work is the exception to the rule for East European SF in the West: he is not marketed or sought out as a Polish writer, almost all of his work has been translated, the book covers spell his name wrong (not barring the “ł” in his first name, pronounced like a “w”), and much of his opus is still in print in English decades after its first appearance. A medical education gave Lem a background in science. His work is extremely broad in scope and theme, ranging from Pinc stories for young adults to the philosophical depth of So­laris, the manic linguistic play (and underlying deep pessimism) of Cyberiad, and the psychedelia of Futuro­logical Congress. Many of his works slyly mock socialist platitudes. (He has also been well served by translators; Michael Kandel, in particular, is a ge­nius.) Lem said that the only Western SF writer worth reading was Philip K. Dick; the paranoid Dick was not pleased to be fingered by a Connie and feared LEM must be the acronym of some malevo­lent agency. Lem aged into a cranky critic, and his later writing is harshly critical of the cultural decline he saw all around him.

The period of “transition” after socialism tended to disrupt the development of SF in Eastern Europe. In the early 1990s in Hungary, where SF had been fairly vigorous, local writers chose to present their own work under plausible pseudonyms as transla­tions from English. Publishers felt—perhaps with justice—that SF by Hungarian authors would not sell. In the twenty-first century, however, there is a wide and vigorous SF scene in Eastern Europe; the biggest SF convention in Eastern Europe, Tricon, takes place in Poland and the Czech Republic. Where Socialis­tera fanzines stopped publication, attractive new magazines—often with “Science Fiction” on the cover alongside Fantasyka or whatever local equiv­alent—have sprung up and do a lively business. East European SF authors are extremely various; some are post-modern (like Zoran Živković, many of whose novels have been translated from Serbian into English), others are better known for their skills (like the Croatian rock guitarist and computer pro­grammer Davor Slamonj). In magazines and book­shops, SF is cheek by jowl with fantasy and horror, and the genres often bleed together.

RUSSIAN AND EAST EUROPEAN SF IN THE WEST

Thanks largely to Darko Suvin, whose 1979 book Metamorphoses of Science Fiction is seminal for SF scholarship, anyone serious about the genre has heard of the most important Russian and East Euro­pean SF authors (up to the 1970s). Suvin devotes chapters to Lem and the Strugatskys. The MacMillan “Best Soviet SF” translations of the 1970s and 1980s, many introduced by Theodore Sturgeon, at­tended to how much a Soviet writer “could say” but also appeared to view SF as a place of common cause despite political differences. Isaac Asimov was editor of an early 1962 collection of Soviet SF in translation. During the Cold War, Russian or East Euro­pean SF could be read as an important source of info about the enemy—or the reader could assume that SF authors were the voices of the future, in which East and West would agree better than in the present. Suvin’s rich and erudite study put a Marx­ist stamp on SF scholarship that has largely endured until the present. Suvin, himself an Eastern Euro­pean, came to North America from Yugoslavia. (Today as well, some prominent scholars of SF bear tellingly East European names—Istvan Csicsery­Ronay, for example.)

With the end of the Cold War, however, formerly curious Western readers and publishers of SF have turned away from the Second World. This is largely due to problems of translation: only about 3% of books published annually in the US are literary translations, and SF tends to be crowded out of this limited market. If you want pulp, we have local pulp; if you want serious lit, well... does SF count as seri­ous lit? Even if today’s Czech or Polish or Russian or Serbian SF is not as cerebral as the Strugatskys, it may demand more effort and engagement than American readers expect from genre fiction, or (God forbid) it might be depressing. The MacMillan series has gone out of print, though many volumes are still available. Some of the best sources for Russian and East European SF today are journals, be they print or online: World Literature Today and Words Without Borders have recently produced admirable international SF issues that included Second-World works, and the 2009 Apex Book of World SF lists Zoran Živković prominently on the cover. It may well take Anglo SF fans time to emerge from their solips­istic universe, but with their rich tradition, imagi­native response to Western SF and fantasy, and (sometimes) deep seriousness the Eastern European and Russian SF authors are well worth a look.

Sibelan Forrester is Professor of Russian in the De­partment of Modern Languages and Literatures at Swarthmore College, a specialist in modernist poetry and translation. Both myopic and astigmatic, she was an avid reader of SF as a young adult in Boulder, Col­orado, but has only recently begun to unite this inter­est with her professional work. She encourages SF readers to be as open to texts, films and other works from distant countries and traditions as the best visions of a human future would have us be.

Part 2
The Field Takes Shape
(1926–1936)

By the 1920s, the American magazine market was booming. Improvements in transportation, technology, and literacy, combined with much more limited enter­tainment options for most people, led to a growing number of “pulp” magazines (for the low-quality paper they were cheaply printed on) with lurid covers.

While pulp magazines tended to be geared to a spe­cific audience, today’s genre distinctions were still very much in the future. Not only was there no real distinc­tion between SF, fantasy, and horror, but many science fiction writers were simultaneously writing Westerns, detective fiction, or nurse stories, or whatever else was in demand that week. Because of the thriving magazine market, the pay was better than today. At the height of the Depression, it was possible for a prolific writer to eke out a living from short stories alone, which is no longer the case.

With not much genre book market to speak of, writers would have to make a living from stories. Book­stores were uncommon outside of major towns, and books were more likely to be sold through catalogs or ads in the backs of magazines.

Out of this burgeoning pulp market, some genre­specific magazines began to appear. Hugo Gernsback began by publishing magazines for electronics enthusi­asts with some fiction scattered in, but in 1926 founded Amazing Stories, the first magazine entirely devoted to science fiction. Weird Tales was publishing H. P. Love­craft, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and other writers who lived at the intersection of SF, fantasy, and horror. (Lovecraft’s weird horror and Robert E. Howard’s archetypal character Conan would make both writers posthumously famous, in the fantasy boom that would come forty years later, after the publication of Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings in the North American.)

That’s not to overstate the quality of the 1920s and early 1930s pulp magazines. While there were some gems and stories of lasting influence, the emphasis was on fast writing and formulaic stories; the overall liter­ary quality was low. Gernsback paid his writers poorly (and sometimes not at all), so Amazing Stories was dis­proportionately stocked with reprints of older stories and newer work by writers who would work cheaply. But beyond the immediate impact of the early pulp writers, many of whom are deservedly forgotten today, was a generation of writers and editors-to-be who grew up reading the pulps and loving the tropes of SF and adventure fiction. And that generation would go on to create science fiction’s “Golden Age” in the late 1930s and 1940s.