

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Searching for Identity:

The Russian Idea in the Soviet and Post-Soviet *Fantastika* Film Adaptation

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Slavic, East European and Eurasian Languages and Cultures

by

Jesse Brown O'Dell

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# ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Ronald W. Vroon, Chair

What is the role of sociocultural history in the evolution of national identity? How is the worldview of Russian citizens reflected in contemporary art and popular culture? My dissertation, which examines narratives of national identity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, approaches these questions and others through an historical analysis of Russian *fantastika* film adaptations and the literary works upon which they are based. Illustrating transitions in perceptions of Russian identity as they are reflected in over thirty examples of Soviet and post-Soviet *fantastika*, this project provides a critical reconsideration of historical theories on the “Russian idea” and offers new perspectives on what it means to be Russian in the twenty-first century.

My study employs a synthesis of approaches from the fields of cultural history, literature, film, and gender studies. The primary hypothesis is that it is possible, through an historical

analysis of *fantastika* film adaptations (and their corresponding literary sources), to obtain a fundamental understanding of post-Soviet culture by examining crucial transformations in the Russian worldview over the course of a century; namely, from 1917 to 2017. These transformations, viewed through the lens of sociocultural history, provide insight into the essential features of national identity in contemporary Russia.

*Fantastika*, a genre which includes science fiction, fantasy, gothic horror, and other works involving fantastical elements, is a highly influential force in the Russian literary and cinematic traditions. Particularly during periods of severe censorship, *fantastika* played an integral role in the dissemination of novel (or “unofficial”) worldviews. Employing alien planets, outer space, and other fantastical settings, Soviet authors and directors developed fictional macrocosms with which to juxtapose contemporary reality and provide commentary on issues relevant to modern society. In the post-Soviet period, techniques borrowed from their predecessors have enabled artists to continue in this tradition, allowing them to offer fresh perspectives on Russia and its place in global society.

Russian national identity has been a subject of international debate for at least three centuries. This dissertation reconsiders models promoted by Russian intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (including Petr Chaadaev, Sergei Uvarov, Nikolai Berdiaev, and Vladimir Bibler) and employs techniques developed by contemporary Western observers (including Birgit Beumers, Eliot Borenstein, and Stephen Norris) to offer a revised assessment of Russian national identity in the twenty-first century. It advances, reframes, and challenges some of the conclusions drawn by these figures by analyzing *fantastika* film adaptations in the context of their (for the most part persuasive) theories. My hope is that this project will be considered a meaningful contribution to the study of Russian culture in the modern age.

The dissertation of Jesse Brown O'Dell is approved.

Gail D. Lenhoff

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Ronald W. Vroon, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

Dedicated to the Memory of Professor Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov.

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## VITA

Jesse O'Dell graduated from New College of Florida in 2010 with a Bachelor of Arts in Russian Studies. In 2013, he was awarded a Master of the Arts degree in Slavic Languages and Literatures from the University of California, Los Angeles. During his studies at UCLA, Jesse received an International Institute Dissertation Fieldwork Fellowship, Center for European and Russian Studies Dissertation Research Fellowship, Mellon Foundation Pre-Dissertation Fellowship, Title VIII Graduate Fellowship, Foreign Language and Areas Studies Summer Grant, Kathryn Davis Fellows for Peace Fellowship, Graduate Research Mentorship Fellowship, and a UCLA Foundation Doctoral Scholar Fellowship. He was employed as a teaching assistant in the Department of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Languages and Cultures from 2011 to 2017, and worked as program coordinator for the Office of Instructional Development's Test of Oral Proficiency Program from 2013 to 2015. In 2017, he presented his article "Russian Blockbuster Cinema: The Post-Soviet Worldview in Russian Film" at the International Association for Humanities Convention in L'viv, Ukraine. In 2018, he presented a related paper, "Searching for Identity: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Science-Fiction Film Adaptations," at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies Convention in Chicago, IL.

# **Searching for Identity: The Russian Idea in the Soviet and post-Soviet *Fantastika* Film Adaptation**

## **Introduction**

Of all the arts, for us cinema is the most important.  
- Vladimir Lenin

*In Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*

Benedict Anderson describes national identity, or “nation-ness,” as “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (Anderson 1983, 3). Although this comment could be considered a bit grandiose, it is clear that associating with a nation or national idea is one of the primary means by which individuals have defined themselves in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From a modern perspective, the statements “I am American” or “I am Russian,” in addition to signifying a country of origin, imply that the speaker identifies with a myriad of values associated with his or her respective culture. An understanding of these values, and their implications for intercultural relationships, may allow for the development of an informed foundation from which to conduct international dialogue.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the subject of Russian national identity has generated a lively academic debate. Similarly, the worldview, or *mirovozzrenie*, of Russian citizens has become a major area of interest for international scholars. Seeking an understanding of Russian culture in the post-Soviet age, they have produced studies that analyze these concepts from political, historical, and sociocultural perspectives. My dissertation, which is historical in

approach and analytic in function, continues in this tradition with an examination of Russian national identity and *mirovozzrenie* as they are reflected in *fantastika* literature and film.

Through a juxtaposition of Russian *fantastika* film adaptations (and their corresponding literary sources), my study illustrates some of the defining characteristics of Russian national identity as it evolved over the course of a century; namely, from 1917 to 2017. In doing so, I address major theories on the “Russian idea” proffered by theorists from the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries and offer new hypotheses on the contemporary Russian worldview.

One of the greatest difficulties facing those who search for a national idea in the Russian context is the issue of terminology. Russia has been a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, multilingual state for many centuries, and has incorporated a number of groups (and former nations) with their own unique sense of cultural identity. What it means to be Russian is a question with a long and complex history, and over the ages perceptions of national identity have often been inconsistent among various ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups. Political transitions in the twentieth century (notably the rise and fall of the Soviet Union), moreover, complicate any attempt to define “Russianness” or a “Russian idea” in a consistent manner. The issue of how one should distinguish Imperial Russian identity from Soviet identity (or either of these from post-Soviet Russian identity) is complex, as is the question of how one should differentiate official state narratives of identity from those developed by non-conforming members of the intellectual elite. I have chosen, therefore, to pursue an approach that underscores boundary-crossing connections between Imperial Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russian identity while also acknowledging important differences between them. In this way, I

comment on a historical narrative of national identity that in many ways supersedes political concerns, while emphasizing sociocultural production (and, in particular, *fantastika* literature and film) as one of the key means by which Russians (and Soviets) have sought to (re)define themselves in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thus, when I refer to Russian national identity in the Soviet context, I am speaking of a conception that both includes and supersedes official state notions of Soviet identity. Likewise, when analyzing works created by artists from various former territories of the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, or Russian Federation (e.g. Ukraine, Poland, Kazakhstan, etc.), I focus on their dialogue with an idea that in some way overshadows issues of sub-nationality – serving as a symbol of unity for all those who label themselves “Russian” (or “Soviet”).

In my research, I have found that an historical analysis of *fantastika* film adaptations is a particularly advantageous approach to the study of national identity for three reasons. First, the ability to juxtapose adaptations with their original literary sources opens avenues for comparative analysis that are absent in purely literary analyses. The ways in which directors have chosen to adapt works of literature can provide insight into their individual perspectives, and the plots, themes, and ideas that they have borrowed may shed light on issues and debates that persisted across various periods of Russian and Soviet cultural history. Second, the medium of cinema, which became a salient vehicle for cultural dialogue in the twentieth century, allows one to employ technical approaches not applicable to textual sources. As I will show in my analysis, cinema’s ability to create impressions through pacing, sound, and visual imagery grants it certain advantages over literature in engaging mass audiences, and also lends it to different (i.e. non-

textual) methodological analyses. Finally, *fantastika*, a genre that includes science fiction, fantasy, gothic horror, and other works involving fantastical elements, is primarily interested in the creation of fictional macrocosms through which to juxtapose opposing ideologies, perspectives, and sociocultural worldviews.

*Fantastika* (from the ancient Greek *φανταστική*), broadly defined, includes any work with a fantastic premise (Kovtun 2008, 71). In the historical Russian context, this term has been applied to gothic horror, science fiction, fantasy, fairy tale, fable and other subgenres (ibid.). Ivan Krylov's fables fall into this category, as do Nikolai Gogol's *Strashnaia mest'* (1831) and *Vii* (1835), Dostoevskii's *Son smeshnogo cheloveka* (1877), and Aleksandr Bogdanov's *Krasnaia zvezda* (1908). As I will show in Chapter 3, moreover, some works of post-Soviet postmodernist fiction can be categorized as *fantastika* as well. Often translated into English as "speculative fiction," *fantastika* is a somewhat vaguely-defined but immensely influential genre. Works of this nature are particularly apt for an analysis of Russian national identity for several reasons. First and foremost, Russian *fantastika* has the tendency to allegorize, satirize, and otherwise comment on contemporary reality by encouraging the viewer (or reader) to juxtapose fantastic worlds with present conditions. Utopias and dystopias illustrate to audiences how much better (or worse) existence could be, while fictional past and parallel present realities allow artists to approach modern issues in creative ways. Second, *fantastika* grants artists the ability not only to portray, but also to advocate for new perspectives, ideas, and ways of life. The character and actions of inhabitants on utopian worlds can often be interpreted as a roadmap for a better society, while depictions of violence and terror on foreign planets or in fantastic fictional

histories provide warnings against regression for human civilization. Finally, particularly during the Soviet period, *fantastika* served as an effective medium for authors and directors to express ideas that were not necessarily in line with state ideology. The allegorical nature of *fantastika* provided a metaphorical shield against the watchful eye of the censor, and allowed some artists to promote apolitical (or even anti-political) ideas and worldviews. For these reasons, among others I identify later in the dissertation, *fantastika* is a particularly felicitous window into perceptions of Russian identity as they evolved over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Russian national identity has been the subject of international debate for at least three centuries. Some of the most notable Russian theorists on the subject include Petr Chaadaev, Sergei Uvarov, Nikolai Berdiaev, and Vladimir Bibler. The evolution of national identity in the post-Soviet environment, moreover, has become a hot topic in Western academic discourse. Elana Gomel, Stephen Norris, and Eliot Borenstein, among others, have developed compelling models for conceptualizing Russian culture and identity in the late Soviet and post-Soviet environments. In order to establish a foundation for my analysis of the worldviews explored and reflected in Russian *fantastika*, I will now introduce some of the concepts that have consistently played a role in debates on the Russian idea in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

One of the earliest characterizations of Russian national identity may be found in Petr Chaadaev's 1830 *Filosoficheskie pis'ma*:

One of the most deplorable things in our unique civilization is that we are just beginning to discover truths which are trite elsewhere – even among people less advanced than we in certain respects. That follows from the fact that we have never



advanced along with other people; we are not related to any of the great human families; we belong neither to the West nor to the East, and we possess the traditions of neither. Placed, as it were, outside of the times, we have not been affected by the universal education of mankind. This admirable linking of human ideas throughout the passing centuries, this history of the human spirit which led the human spirit to the position which it occupies in the rest of the world today, had no effect on us. What has long constituted the very basis of social life in other lands is still only theory and speculation for us (Chaadaev 1969, 27).

Chaadaev imagined history as a set of connections between civilizations and, in both this first philosophical letter and his later “*Apologia sumasshedshevo*,” claimed that the Russian people had developed along a different path from Eastern and Western cultural traditions (Chaadaev 1969, 207). Underscoring a perceived dichotomy between Russians and the inhabitants of other developed nations, Chaadaev viewed Russia as a society that stretched from Europe to Asia, but was fundamentally detached from each. This idea was a defining feature of debates between the Russian Slavophiles (including Ivan Kireevskii, Aleksei Khomiakov, and Ivan Aksakov) and westernizers (including Aleksandr Herzen and Vissarion Belinskii) of the nineteenth century. According to literary historian Julia Brun-Zejmis,

Chaadaev's gloomy pronouncements about his homeland placed the problem of Russia's historical destiny at the center of nineteenth century Russian philosophy which, in turn, shaped Russian national self-awareness. Although Chaadaev belonged to neither Slavophiles nor westernizers, representatives of both groups looked upon him as their intellectual mentor. Stimulated and provoked by Chaadaev's condemnation of their country, both Slavophiles and westernizers tried to define their views in terms of the western perspective. In effect, Chaadaev's idealized image of the west imposed a feeling of permanent national inferiority and influenced generations of Russian thinkers (Brun-Zejmis 1991, 647).

Chaadaev's philosophy served as a foundation for early debates on Russian national identity and Russia's role and place in the world (Aizlewood 2000, 20). As I will show later in my analysis,

his ideas continued to influence conceptions of nationhood during the Soviet period and, in contemporary academic discourse, have served as a crucial starting point for theories concerning the role of the “other” in post-Soviet culture.

Nikolai Berdiaev’s *Dusha Rossii* (1915), a pre-revolutionary philosophical study, builds on the idea of a separation between Russia and the West and compounds it with a theory concerned with gender and power dynamics.

Russia has not as yet played a defining role within world life, it has not as yet genuinely entered into the life of European mankind. . . . In the Russian national element there is a sort of eternal danger of winding up in captivity, of being submissive to that external to it. And a true renewal of Russia can only be in a radical liberation from every captivity, from every stranglehold and enslavement to the external, the outside, the foreign, i.e. the revealing within of an inner manliness, an inner light, a spirit self-governing and creative (Berdyayev 2016, 2).

According to Berdiaev’s philosophy, the primary quality of the Russian soul is “passivity,” something that may be contrasted with a “masculine freedom” that he viewed as the dominating force in European nations (Berdyayev 2016, 6). He regarded Russia as a nation fundamentally separated from Western Europe, but recognizably inferior in terms of economic and cultural development. In the twentieth century, scholars have postulated that this aspect of Russian national identity has chronically manifested itself in a shared sociocultural mentality preoccupied with being submissive to and enslaved by other nations (Brun-Zejmis 1991, 646). In the post-Soviet space, this phenomenon is regularly described as something akin to a national inferiority complex. Analyzing trends in cultural production over the past twenty-five years, scholars have sought to define this complex and highlight its manifestations in contemporary culture. I will continue in this endeavor, approaching the material from a perspective that recognizes Russian

identity as one preoccupied with power dynamics and an aspiration to avoid being dominated by that external to it.

In addition to Berdiaev's claim that Russian culture is submissive to the foreign, *Dusha Rossii* contains a second principle that is frequently repeated in modern academic discourse:

Here also, just like everywhere, with the question about the freedom and slavery of the soul of Russia, about its wanderlust and its immobility, we come up against the secret correlation of the masculine and the feminine. The root of these deep contradictions – is in the disunitedness of the masculine and the feminine within the Russian soul and the Russian character. The unbounded freedom is countermanded by a boundless slavery, the eternal wont for wandering – by an eternal stagnancy, and therefore the masculine freedom does not imbue the feminine national element in Russia from within, from the depths. The masculine principle is always awaited from the outside, the personal principle does not reveal itself within the Russian people. Hence the eternal dependence upon the foreigner (Berdyayev 2016, 6).

The idea that Russia is a feminine, submissive nation has played a major role in the self-perception and worldview of Russian citizens over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Contemporary scholars, among them Birgit Beumers and Eliot Borenstein, have analyzed manifestations of this aspect of Russian identity, which they link to a national interest in military prestige, a perceived ideological superiority to other nations, and a pronounced separation of the genders (Borenstein 2008, 89). My analysis reevaluates this feature of Berdiaev's philosophy in light of contemporary feminist film theory, investigating questions of agency and dominance in relation to gender in Russian *fantastika*. My study endeavors to illustrate notable transformations in depictions of gender in Soviet and post-Soviet *fantastika* and offer new theories on the role of women in the contemporary Russian *mirovozzrenie*.

In his 1993 essay *Natsional'naia russkaia ideia? Russkaia rech! Opyt kul'turologicheskogo predpolozheniia*, Vladimir Bibler reexamines the Russian “troika” of national identity imagined by Sergei Uvarov in the nineteenth century (*pravoslavie – samoderzhavie – narodnost'*) and connects it with an updated version by Soviet theorist A. Kiva (*derzhavnost' – religioznost' – narodnost'*). He asserts that, in each model, the notion of national sovereignty is both threatened by and inimical to the individual.

But this national idea with its three components, in which Sovereignty is the dominant component, also incorporates a fundamental and endless opposition, i.e. an opposition to democracy and civil society. I think that, strictly speaking, a national – sovereign – imperialist idea has no real positive meaning. Its real meaning is purely negative. In speaking about the priority of Statehood (with its spiritual and earthly characteristics), only one thing is meant: denial of the sovereignty of the individual, or, more precisely, denial of the sovereignty of the person in civic and cultural aspects. The idyll of a monolithic national monster conceals something that is far from idyllic, namely the destruction (or at least essential restriction) of the right of the person to form groups on the basis of agreement (i.e. such that they could preserve their fundamental sovereignty), whether these collectives have an economic, political, ethnic, or governmental character. . . . Given this interpretation, “the people” is a notion that implies negation of the sovereignty of the individual (Bibler 2004, 62).

Bibler emphasizes an essential feature of Imperial Russian (and Soviet) national identity: in Uvarov's (and Kiva's) conception of the Russian idea, the state and the “people” are constantly at odds with the individual.<sup>1</sup> Democracy, in its most basic definition, is incompatible with the Russian idea because it relegates state sovereignty to an inferior position. That is, if the government is dependent upon the will of individuals or independent groups, the ideology behind

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<sup>1</sup> This paradigm was first established by the Slavophiles of the nineteenth century, notably Aleksei Khomiakov and Ivan Kireevskii. A particularly illuminating commentary on the subject can be found in Robin Aizlewood's article “Revisiting Russian Identity in Russian Thought: From Chaadaev to the Early Twentieth Century” (Aizlewood 2000, 40).

Uvarov's *troika* is negated. In Chapter 3, I will show how this aspect of historical "Russianness" contributed to a major reconsideration of national identity following the fall of the Soviet Union and institutionalization of democracy in the early 1990s.

Marxism-Leninism, a term used to define the political philosophy of the Communist Party in the twentieth century, is an indispensable lens through which to view national identity in the Soviet period. This ideology, which sought the creation of a socialist state, emphasizing the importance of class struggle, equality between the sexes, collective labor, atheism, and single-party rule, was the defining feature of Soviet national identity in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Because it was promoted by the government as the only official (and legal) ideology, Marxism-Leninism served as the defining metric by which artistic production was evaluated. Writers and directors of this period were required to support the goals of the party by creating works that could appeal to the masses and educate the population in the ideals of the socialist system. Works that promoted competing ideologies or bore elements that were contrary to official dogma were censored, banned, or abandoned, and artists who consistently pushed the boundaries of the acceptable were (often harshly) repressed. However, as I discuss in Chapter 1, Marxism-Leninism began to lose its stranglehold on the arts in the mid-1950s, ushering in an era of works that were neither especially concerned with dogma nor subject to the strict censorship laws established under Stalin. As a result, Soviet art went through a period of dramatic liberalization that witnessed challenges to official ideology and sought to redefine national identity in less political terms. Works from the genre of *fantastika*, in particular, played a crucial role in

extending the boundaries of Soviet identity beyond predominantly ideological concerns (more on that in Chapter 2).

In the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s a number of novel or revised theories of Russian national identity have been posited by Western scholars. In her book *A History of Russian Cinema*, Birgit Beumers writes:

After the collapse of the Soviet empire, the issue of national identity dominated many cinematic narratives, but also many debates among filmmakers about the role of Russian cinema in society. Soviet identity had disappeared and made way for the formation of a new Russian identity. In the first instance, artists harked back to the pre-Revolutionary and Soviet past to re-establish the severed link with Imperial Russia or to rewrite Soviet history – but now (as opposed to the 1980s) they did not only condemn the past. Coming to terms with the effects of Stalinism still played a major role in this debate, although the filmmakers’ focus extended to historic periods beyond the 1930s. In the second instance, filmmakers investigated Russia’s historical role between East and West, between Europe and Asia. As everyday life changed radically in the 1990s, the relationship between the center and the periphery was also reassessed. A related theme was that of escape – from reality, from a collapsing society, and from a defunct economy – into other worlds, other countries or dreams (Beumers 2009, 214).

A reassessment of the Imperial Russian and Soviet past became a central focus for artists in the post-Soviet period. In the chaotic 1990s, amid a flood of media and new ideas from predominantly foreign sources, some writers and directors turned to *fantastika* as a way to juxtapose new and old ideologies while offering a momentary escape from reality. As I will show Chapter 3, many adopted models from their (predominantly underground) Soviet counterparts to illustrate novel worldviews and provide revised models of national identity in the “New Russia.”

In his monograph, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*, cultural historian Eliot Borenstein links pornography and fiction to offer a gendered approach to understanding the post-Soviet worldview.

Pornography as a genre was distinguished from the rest of the mainstream not by its dogged attention to all things genital but by its unwavering focus on the sexually explicit as both an integral part of the nation's culture and an allegory for it. . . . Even if highbrow fiction containing explicit sexual scenes has an entirely different readership from that of the Russian *Playboy* clones, literary fiction and pornography are constituent parts of the unique discourse that falls under the rubric of post-Soviet Russian pornography: the depiction of sexualized bodies to explore a national idea (Borenstein 2008, 56).

Borenstein claims that Russian national dialogue in the post-Soviet world is profoundly concerned with gender and sexuality. In conjunction with a reassessment of Berdiaev's theories of the feminine East and masculine West, the foreign dominator and the servile Russian, he shows how a (re)consideration of gender can provide useful insights into the foundational features of the post-Soviet Russian worldview. Borenstein illustrates his theory by analyzing depictions of violence in turn-of-the-century art and popular culture, ultimately asserting that twenty-first-century Russia has become a hyper-masculinized society (Borenstein 2008, 128-130). While his arguments are generally convincing, this dissertation will seek to challenge some of his conclusions and offer a new assessment on the role of gender, sexuality, and violence in contemporary Russian culture.

The final theory that I will introduce is best illustrated with an excerpt from Stephen Norris's *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism*.

The new blockbuster, as Oleg Sul'kin has argued, combined American styles with Russian content: "Russian filmmakers realized they couldn't make a pure genre

picture. Their films continue to be guided by the notion that a film must have an idea, a message, convey the national spirit somehow.” Success – and by 2008 Russian films made up nearly 40 percent of the market – came by merging the past with contemporary patriotism (Norris 2012, 4).

Citing Russian journalist Oleg Sul’kin, Norris claims that directors of the Putin era have employed foreign (namely American) modes and cinematic techniques to create films designed to “convey the national spirit.” The technical complexity of Hollywood films was emulated in order to draw in larger audiences and increase competitiveness on the global market, but Russian “blockbusters” have historically been aimed at a predominantly domestic viewership. Thus, while to an uninformed observer the importation of foreign techniques might suggest that Russian national identity in the post-Soviet sphere has become less concerned with the imbalanced dichotomy between East and West (i.e. “us” and “them”), I will show that the exact opposite is true. That is, while Russian directors have sought to imitate Western cinematic modes, they have placed considerable effort into creating films that relate explicitly to national culture. Nevertheless, the interrelationship between American and Russian cinema provides a useful lens through which to examine questions of Russian national identity in the twenty-first century.

Considering the expansive range of subjects to which the theories above might apply, it would be counterproductive to employ all of them in an analysis of any particular work. However, in combination with a directed examination of important trends in Soviet and post-Soviet *fantastika* cinema, these theories may provide insight into the Russian *mirovozzrenie* as it evolved over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thus, while my investigation



is far from exhaustive, it should establish the basis for future analyses of *fantastika*, literature, film adaptation, and national identity in the Soviet and post-Soviet environments.

Several more specialized theories on the Russian idea, many of which are convincing, will not be included in this study for one of two reasons. Either they are applied to mediums that are not easily comparable to literature and film, such as Vladimir Paperny's research on the political and sociocultural bases for the development of architecture in the Soviet Union (Paperny 2002), or they can be classified as subcategories of the concepts mentioned above, as is Daniel Rancour-Laferriere's investigation of masochism as a defining cultural trait of the Soviet intelligentsia (Rancour-Laferriere 1995). While studies of this nature are inspirational and well-deserving of attention, they are outside the scope of this dissertation.

# Chapter 1

## From the Beginnings of *Fantastika* Film to the End of the Stalin Era

I divide my analysis of the history of Russian and Soviet *fantastika* film adaptations into six time periods: the 1920s, 1930-1956, 1957-1967, 1968-1985, 1986-2000, and 2000-2017. Although these periods roughly approximate important political developments and overlap in certain areas, I chose them because they may be viewed as eras of pivotal transformation in perceptions of Russian (and Soviet) national identity. This chapter will provide a justification for my proposed chronology and illustrate some of the essential features of early Soviet identity through an analysis of three popular film adaptations: *Aelita* (Protazanov 1924), *Gibel' sensatsii* (Andrievskii 1935), and *Taina dvukh okeanov* (Pipinashvili 1956). In the context of the theories presented in the introduction, an examination of these film adaptations and the literary works upon which they are based will elucidate foundational characteristics of Russian national identity during the 1920s and the Stalin era (1930-1956). These characteristics will serve as context for my analysis of a shared national identity and worldview in the post-Stalinist (Chapter 2) and post-Soviet (Chapter 3) cultural spheres. Let me begin, however, with an overview of the nascent years of Russian cinema. My aim is not to be comprehensive about this or any other successive period, but to establish a foundation of critical areas in which a dissection of *fantastika* film adaptations may produce insight into the popular cultural dialogue of a given era.

## Early History of Russian Film (1896-1919)

The history of Russian cinema began in 1896 with a touring cinematograph, first exhibited in France by Auguste and Louis Lumière in the previous year. Their invention projected short reels and travelled through major Russian cities as a novel attraction (Goldovskii 1961, 7). In May of 1896, the coronation of Nikolai II became the first film to feature a Russian subject, and the first movie theater was opened on Nevskii Prospekt in the same year (Zorkaia 2005, 8). However, while interest in the nascent artform was high among the Russian nobility, resources and talent were scarce through the turn of the century.

Although Russian hobbyists had begun to produce short reels in the late 1890s, most scholars set the genesis of the Russian film industry in either 1907 or 1908. The first Russian short film to attract national attention, *Ponizovaia vol'nitsa (Sten'ka razin)*, premiered on 15 December 1908 and heralded a massive growth in the industry (Beumers 2009, 9). In the following decade, foundational masters of Russian cinema, including Vladimir Sashin, Vasiliï Goncharev, Vladislav Starevich, and Iakov Protazanov, worked to develop this new medium both artistically and commercially. *Kino*, the first Russian journal specifically focused on cinema, began circulation in late 1907; the first feature film, *Oborona sevastopolia*, premiered in 1911; and, while fewer than ten artistic films were made in 1908, five hundred had been produced in over fifty studios by 1916 (Sokolov 2007, 3). Semen Sergeevich Ginzburg, a film historian and editor of prominent film journals in the Soviet era, described the cultural influence of cinema at the time of World War I in the following terms:

In 1916 no fewer than one hundred and fifty million tickets to the movie theater were sold in Russia. This means that, on average, for every book that was read there were five or six visits to the cinema, and for every theater ticket sold . . . ten to twelve tickets to the movie theater. It is possible, therefore, to argue that, in pre-revolutionary Russia (at least during the first world war) cinema played a greater role than either literature or the theater in satisfying the aesthetic demands of the population (Ginzburg 1963, 8-9).<sup>2</sup>

Even with this level of growth and societal interest, however, foreign cinema dominated Russian markets until after the Russian Revolution. A dearth of professionally-trained filmmakers and, more importantly, film equipment, created an environment in which the industry struggled to compete with French, Italian, British, German, and American imports (Beumers 2009, 8). As such, cinema was a predominantly foreign enterprise in Imperial Russia. Critically, however, the boom that the Russian film industry experienced from 1908 to 1917 illustrates a broad interest among the population for domestically-produced reels. That is, although cinema was considered a principally foreign medium and collective box-office sales were higher for foreign products, Russian audiences were eager to experience films focused on national culture. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, an almost identical phenomenon occurred in the first decade of the twenty-first century: a collective cultural interest in national (as opposed to foreign) cinema contributed to the rapid development of a domestic industry. Tellingly, in the post-Soviet era, as in pre-revolutionary Russia, prominent filmmakers turned to adaptations as a means to address topics germane to Russian audiences.

According Birgit Beumers, “In early cinema (1908-1912) the majority of films were documentaries and only a third were acted; of the art films, 53 percent were adaptations, 26

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

percent historical, 13 percent melodramas, and 8 percent comedies” (Beumers 2009, 18). Film adaptations were the predominant form of artistic Russian cinema and, as a result, the tradition of *ekranizatsiia* developed as a crucial vehicle for addressing issues of national interest. In the absence of original screenplays, these adaptations served as a means to reaffirm or reformulate ideas pertaining to Russian identity and express them to a broad audience.<sup>3</sup> As an artform that could appeal to the illiterate layers of society – which represented, by all accounts, at least 60% of the population at the time of the revolution – this medium was apt for creating cultural dialogue on a mass scale. Moreover, by building on the foundation of an established literary tradition, directors of early Russian film adaptations were able to rely on familiar literary narratives, themes, and tropes to address issues that were native to Russian audiences.

The value of film as a mechanism for spurring dialogue was established in the pre-revolutionary era, but it was in the following period that the Bolshevik party began a conscious effort to utilize artistic cinema as a means to “educate the largely illiterate masses in the rightness of the Bolshevik cause” (Gillespie 2000, 4). Just over a month after the October Revolution, a censorship apparatus that oversaw film production was created through the People’s Commissariat for Education (NARKOMPROS), headed by Anatolii Lunacharskii, and under the influence of Nadezhda Krupskaya (Vladimir Lenin’s wife). In 1919, the Soviet government fully nationalized the film industry and the Soviet State School of Cinematography (*VGIK*) opened as the first institution of its type in the world (Iurenev 1979, 23). Propaganda and documentary reels

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of early *ekranizatsiia*, see Iakov Protazanov’s *Bakhchisaraiskii fontan* (1910) and *Pikovaia dama* (1915), Petr Chardinin’s *Idiot* (1910), or Vladimir Gardin’s *Anna Karenina* (1914) and *Voina i mir* (1915).

outnumbered works of artistic cinema by a significant number during the Russian Civil War.

However, the Bolshevik leadership was cognizant of the importance of artistic cinema and encouraged the production of feature films that would illustrate the Soviet worldview.

To ensure that these films would give proper glory to the revolutionaries and their deeds, the censorship apparatus effectively served as a second layer of authority in the creative process. Regularly editing, deleting, and rewriting portions of the screenplays, censors often had more control over the production of a film than the director. Ronald Levaco described the prevalence of censorship in early Soviet cinema in the following terms:

[T]he censorship of Soviet films underpins the *total process* of preproduction (the writing of the scenario and the constitution of the budget), production (the actual shooting of the film), and post-production (the editing, printing, and release of the film). In addition, there is also control of the distribution of the film, its screening, the number of prints assigned to its dissemination, the charges assigned to its rental, and – most tellingly – its foreign release, sale, and distribution (Levaco 1984, 176).

In the early 1920s, cinema became a tool of the regime to justify the revolution and express a vision of the socialist future. In attempt to achieve those goals, the censorship apparatus ensured that artistic films which did not meet the requirements imposed upon them by the censors would not be screened, and that directors who consistently pushed the boundaries of acceptable practice would not be rewarded with future projects. It is in this environment that Iakov Protazanov produced the first Soviet *fantastika* film adaptation.

Over a quarter of a century after the fall of the Soviet Union, it is tempting to discount the impact of Bolshevik ideology on the development of Russian national identity in the first half of the twentieth century. From the perspective of those in the West who have witnessed the rapid

dismantling of socialist policies and cultural traditions in the post-Soviet sphere, the idea of Soviet authority as an all-powerful oppressor of cultural freedom and an enemy of artistic expression is a seductive oversimplification. To obtain an accurate understanding of the evolution of Russian national identity in the 1920s, however, we must accept the Russian Revolution for what it was: a powerful nexus of a plethora of symbiotic cultural forces. If we can accept that this revolution was not simply a political coup or a usurpation of authority, but rather an expression of the will of countless individuals from every stratum of society, we may find a fundamentally superior approach to the study of Russian national identity. That is, rather than approaching the Bolshevik Revolution as a *cause* for the foundation of an authoritarian regime, we must view it as an *effect* of a wide array of sociocultural forces – many of which continued to play a role in the development of a cultural mentality and system of politics that *became* totalitarian.

In this light, the Russian Revolution may be considered the most significant cultural event of the first half of the twentieth century; one that is arguably unparalleled in Russian history until the fall of the Soviet Union. However, we must be careful to avoid the simplistic interpretation that the Revolution was the sole (or even primary) cause for the events that followed. Rather, the sociocultural and political developments of the 1920s must be viewed against the backdrop of their particular historical context. It is from this perspective, one that imagines cultural history as a system profoundly influenced by politics but extending well beyond the political in breadth and complexity, that I begin my analysis of the first two periods of *fantastika* film adaptation.

## **The Genesis of Soviet Identity: *Aelita* and the Foundations of *Fantastika* Fiction (1920-1929)**

My analysis of the first period of *fantastika* film adaptation encompasses a comparatively short period of time but represents one of the most important parts of this dissertation. It investigates an era of rapid political and sociocultural transformation, addresses foundational features of Soviet *fantastika* as a genre, and details the evolution of Russian national identity in the decade following the revolution. In this section, I will argue that some members of the Soviet artistic community experienced a wave of liberal optimism in the years leading up to Lenin's death that was crushed by a trend toward ideological conservatism by the end of the decade. I will illustrate this transition through an analysis of two works that are widely considered classics of Soviet *fantastika* fiction: Aleksei Tolstoi's 1923 novella *Aelita* and Iakov Protazanov's 1924 film adaptation bearing the same name. An examination of their narratives, production histories, and critical reception will serve to support my theories on the development of Russian national identity in the decade following the fall of the Russian Empire and illustrate the value of examining *fantastika* film adaptations as a tool for sociocultural analysis.

Iakov Aleksandrovich Protazanov witnessed the Russian Revolution from Moscow. Between 1910 and 1920 he produced nearly eighty short films in multiple studios in the city. His works include literary adaptations, historical dramas, and propagandistic revolutionary exposés developed during the Russian Civil War (Ginzburg 1963, 238). Semen Ginzburg considered Protazanov's propaganda films to be the best in the genre, and the critical success his artistic films enjoyed granted the director a modest level of fame both at home and abroad. By the time



he moved to France to study international film production in 1920, Protazanov's adaptations of *Voina i mir* (1915), *Pikovaia dama* (1916), and *Otets Sergii* (1918) had already established him as a foundational master of Russian national cinema.

After the Bolshevik victory in the Russian Civil War, Protazanov returned to the Soviet Union in 1923 and began work on *Aelita*. Aleksei Tolstoi's homonymous novel had been published in the previous year and, intrigued by the work's otherworldly setting and positive portrayal of revolutionary action, Protazanov acquired the right to adapt it to film. In hopes of producing a modern reel that could appeal to a broad audience, Protazanov chose to adapt this novel because he believed that its plot was well suited to expressing the Bolshevik worldview, withstanding the scrutiny imposed by Soviet censorship, and creating a national film that could compete on the international market.

One of the most difficult tasks standing before creators of contemporary cinema is the choice of a suitable subject for motion pictures. The enormous number of reels with the most varied content being thrown out onto the market leads to a situation in which the subjects begin to repeat themselves, making it almost impossible to create a completely original picture that would not give the impression to viewers that they had seen the same thing before. . . . For the creators of *Aelita* this task was complicated by the fact that they established for themselves the goal of making a picture, not only original in form, not only artistically and ideologically satisfying, but also capable of competing with the very greatest foreign reels on the so-called "world" scale. *Aelita* had to be a worthy representative of Russian cinematography abroad (*Kino-nedelia* 1924a).

It is fair to assume that, from Protazanov's perspective, the revolutionary theme, cosmic scale, and contemporary setting of the adaptation would be welcomed by the new Soviet government and allay any questions of loyalty for a man who had abandoned Russia during the years of the chaotic civil war. Instead of a positive reception, however, Protazanov's adaptation was received

coolly by Soviet critics. Although it received a few positive reviews at the time its release, the majority of critical analyses concerning *Aelita* published in the first half of the twentieth century were overwhelmingly negative (Hildreth 2009). Critics lambasted *Aelita* as “an attempt to please the viewers of capitalist countries,” and a “film for the bourgeoisie” (Lebedev 1965, 35). Lev Kuleshov described it as the “blind alley of pre-revolutionary cinema,” and Dziga Vertov decried the “aimlessness and uselessness of the picture” (*Kino-nedelia* 1924b). Moreover, although both Tolstoi’s novella and Protazanov’s adaptation had garnered considerable popularity, *Aelita*’s adaptation was increasingly denounced over the course of the decade and ultimately removed from circulation in the 1930s (Katsigras and Rozhdestvenskii 22, 1936). In spite of the fact that it had passed through multiple stages of censorship, had fulfilled the objectives assigned by NARKOMPROS, and had been embraced by the population at the time of its release, the Soviet bureaucracy viewed *Aelita* as an ideological and artistic failure.

The film’s poor reception by Soviet critics indicates a critical transformation in Russian society. Following Lenin’s death in 1924, policies spearheaded by Stalin precipitated a major shift towards conservatism and ideological orthodoxy in the sociocultural sphere. The production history of *Aelita*, released on the eve of this transformation, may serve as a serendipitous example for the analysis of this phenomenon.

Throughout the 1920s, an ideological war was waged between supporters of artistic freedom and those who took a hardline approach toward censorship. Lenin had praised cinema as “the most important art for Soviet society” and advocated for the creation of ideologically-sound films that would be visually inspiring to proletarian audiences (Lenin 1970, 579). Unlike some

ideological hardliners in the party, Lenin was against the elimination of all forms of liberalism in art, writing that “proletarian culture must be the logical development of the store of knowledge mankind has accumulated under the yoke of capitalist, landowner, and bureaucratic society” (Sopontsinsky 1978, 6). However, he was ambiguous about the form that a predominantly artistic film might take, and deputized Russian filmmakers and the newly-formed censorship apparatus to develop his vision. It is in this environment that *Aelita* was produced, filmed, and conducted through censorship. Unfortunately for Protazanov, after Lenin’s death in January of 1924 the party leadership was beset by a chaotic power struggle to replace him.<sup>4</sup> In the political sphere, this ultimately resulted in Joseph Stalin securing overwhelming authority by the end of the decade. More importantly for our discussion, however, this transition of leadership resulted in a monumental transformation in Soviet art and society.

A major consequence of the political struggle that took place after 1924 was a widespread movement toward ideological purity in the ranks of the party. In attempting to prove their loyalty during a period of unclear leadership, many members of the bureaucracy began to outwardly adopt an increasingly hardline political stance. In the censorship apparatus, this manifested itself in a campaign to reign in the arts and force them in line with Bolshevik ideology; one that would become progressively more reactionary over the course of the decade. As a result, works of art that were previously considered ideologically acceptable began to receive harsh criticism for

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<sup>4</sup> According to Birgit Beumers, “The mid-1920s were a period that saw some of the most remarkable montage films at the height of the Soviet experiments in art, but it was also a time when political attention was focused on the consolidation of power by the country’s new leader, Iosif Stalin” (Beumers 2009, 47).

their themes and messages. This is how *Aelita*, by no means the only casualty of this shift, became an icon of “bourgeoisie cinema” in spite of its apparent pro-revolutionary message.

Stalin, himself a hardliner, promoted the reactionary environment that began with Lenin’s death as a means to eradicate uncommitted (or unsupportive) members of the party and consolidate power. Perhaps best illustrated by his infamous purges and mass deportations of the 1930s and 1940s, Stalin’s devotion to maintaining ideological unity was absolute. Moreover, as the government became increasingly involved in the social lives of the population over the course of his rule, ideological backwardness came to be framed as a serious crime against the Soviet state.

In the mid-1920s, before Stalin had fully established himself as the undisputed leader of the party, manifestations of the cultural shift toward conservatism were considerably more subtle. Reactionary artistic criticism and public expressions of contempt for “ideologically impure” art developed as a means for citizens and members of the bureaucracy to publicly align themselves with the current popular ideology. As this ideology became progressively more reactionary, even the works that the party had commissioned and produced itself became the target of negative attention.

As a consequence of the criticisms leveled against Soviet cinema, censors began to apply increasing pressure on the artists themselves through restrictive policies. This created a situation in which critics and censors, in competition to prove ideological superiority, contributed to the creation of a cyclical mechanism that progressively transformed Soviet cultural production. From the time of Lenin’s death into the 1930s, 40s, and early 50s, a rash of hardline policies and

criticism contributed to a fundamental shift in the Soviet artistic environment. As will be discussed later in the chapter, this trend lost its force only after the death of Joseph Stalin, on the cusp of the first period of cultural liberalization in the Soviet Union (known as the Thaw).

## Aleksei Tolstoi's *Aelita*

Aleksei Tolstoi's *Aelita* was first serialized in the journal *Krasnaia nov'* in 1922-1923. Set in post-Civil War St. Petersburg, the greater portion of the novel takes place on Mars. The story opens with Archibald Skiles, an American journalist who finds a notice, posted in a public place, with an incredible invitation. The note reads, "Engineer M.S. Los invites anyone interested in flying to Mars with him on August 18 to come for a personal interview between 6:00 and 8:00 in the evening. Zhdanov embankment, number 11, street level" (Tolstoi 1922, 104). This invitation leads to a meeting between Skiles and Mstislav Sergeevich Los, the novel's protagonist.<sup>5</sup> A Soviet engineer who has created a ship capable of traveling to Mars and back, Los accepts money from Skiles in exchange for exclusive rights to the travel notes from Los' interplanetary trip. This seemingly innocuous meeting presents the first image of capitalism in the novel, an ideology that is ultimately shown to constitute an overwhelmingly negative force on Mars. Bearing the totem of early Soviet propaganda, capitalism is portrayed as a dangerous and destructive system.

Los and Aleksei Gusev, a friend and former Red Army soldier, launch the spacecraft toward Mars in full view of their Soviet comrades. However, before their departure, they have a conversation about what they intend to find on the "Red Planet":

"As far as you know," he asked, "are there people there or monsters?" Los scratched the back of his head and laughed. "I think that there should be people there, something like us. We'll see when we get there. Here's the thing: for the last few years the large radio stations in Europe and America have been receiving unexplained signals. At first, they thought the signals were the result of storms in the magnetic fields of Earth. But the mysterious sounds were too much like alphabet signals. Someone is determined to

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<sup>5</sup> I have rendered the Russian name *Los* simply as Los in my translations.

talk to us. . . . Mars wants to speak to the Earth. For now, we cannot respond to these signals. But we are going in response to an invitation. It's hard to imagine that the radio stations on Mars were built by monsters, by creatures that do not resemble us. Mars and Earth are two tiny marbles spinning near each other. The same law applies to us and to them. The dust of life races through the universe. The same spores land on Mars and on Earth, on the myriads of cooled stars. Life appears everywhere and the form most like humans rules the other life forms: no animal more perfect than man can be created" (Tolstoi 1922, 111-112).

This conversation introduces one of the most consistent principles of Soviet science fiction: an insistence that, if life exists on other planets, humanoid creatures must represent its highest form.

A ubiquitous feature of Soviet *fantastika* after *Aelita*, this principle is indicative of a crucial transformation in the worldview of the Russian population in the years immediately following the revolution. In the newly-formed Soviet society, religion and the Tsar were no longer the center of traditional values and heavenly entities (including the Orthodox God) were no longer the most powerful beings in the universe – it was the dawn of Soviet man.

While the idea that humankind represents the highest form of life in the universe is an integral part of Orthodox theology, the removal of God as the supreme source of authority is a foundational premise of early Bolshevik ideology. The concept of the “new Soviet man,” which arose in the early 1920s and was propagated by Lev Trotskii and other Marxist theorists, proposed that an evolved species of humankind would arise as a natural consequence of the revolution and new socialist system. This evolved man would lead the world into an era of prosperity, abundance, and peace as a result of his superior nature. According to this worldview, there was no need for a supreme being or guiding external force to create utopia, only the unerring implementation of socialist policies and practices. Thus, although the creation of

humankind might have been attributed to God in the Russian Empire, in the Soviet Union creation would be understood in the context of (Darwinist, and later, Lamarckian) evolutionary theory and viewed through the lens of Marxist historical materialism. The absence of any reference to God in *Aelita*, I believe, is a reflection of this aspect of the new Soviet worldview.

The persecution of Christians and Orthodox clergy after the revolution and Lenin's theory of "militant atheism" betray a violently antagonistic approach toward religion. Bolshevik theorists believed that God and the new Soviet man could not coexist, and the leadership acted aggressively to encourage the population to convert to atheism. However, in a society that had practiced Orthodox Christianity for centuries, there was staunch opposition to their efforts. To expedite the transition to atheism, therefore, Soviet artists were encouraged to develop an accurate portrayal of this new Soviet man and create works that might appeal to his theoretical sensibilities. In Lev Trotskii's 1923 *Literatura i revoliutsia*, he writes:

When one speaks of revolutionary art, two kinds of artistic phenomena are meant: the works whose themes reflect the Revolution, and the works which are not connected with the Revolution in theme, but are thoroughly imbued with it, and are colored by the new consciousness arising out of the Revolution. These are phenomena which quite evidently belong, or could belong, in entirely different planes. Alexey Tolstoi, in his *The Road to Calvary*, describes the period of the War and the Revolution. He belongs to the peaceful Yasnaya Polyana school, only his scale is infinitely smaller and his point of view narrower. . . . There is no revolutionary art as yet. There are the elements of this art, there are hints and attempts at it, and, what is most important, there is the Revolutionary Man, who is forming the new generation in his own image and who is more and more in need of this art (Trotsky 2005, 229-230).

Replacing the Biblical god as the center of power and ideological authority, the new Soviet man was meant to serve as both a role model and a mouthpiece for the Bolshevik worldview. As I will show in my analysis, Tolstoi's novella – which was released in the same year and by the



same publisher<sup>6</sup> as Trotskii's book – places heroic revolutionaries at the center of its ideological frame. It is both “connected to the Revolution in theme” and “colored by the new consciousness arising out of the Revolution.” As such, it is a noteworthy example of the type of literature advocated by Trotskii (and other Bolshevik theorists) in the early 1920s.

As evidence of Tolstoi's artistic success, I draw the reader's attention once again to the ubiquity of the humanoid-alien trope in Soviet *fantastika*. *Aelita* set a precedent that, rather than dwelling on the possibility of encountering superior beings or extraordinary creatures on alien planets, focused primarily on the interactions between humanoid inhabitants of different worlds. This feature is of the utmost importance to the current study because it creates common ground for the juxtaposition of civilizations – a space in which the experiences of one society may offer lessons on the positive and negative aspects of specific ideologies and worldviews in another. As an efficient way of circumventing Soviet censorship, *Aelita*'s humanoid-alien trope established a model that would allow future writers to develop intelligent discussions of foreign ideologies – even under the acute restrictions of socialist realism.

As with *fantastika*, the avant-garde movements that dominated Russian art in the first two decades of the twentieth century began to suffer from the cultural shift toward conservatism in the late 1920s. Long before socialist realism came to represent the only acceptable form of artistic expression, members of these groups were targeted by the bureaucracy and regularly demonized for their work. As a result, authors and directors were increasingly pressured to apply a realist approach to pass censorship restrictions. The effects of this transformation were such

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<sup>6</sup> The publisher *Krasnaia nov'* – parent to the eponymous journal (Trotskii 1923).

that, by the beginning of the second period of *fantastika* film adaptation, non-realist modes had almost completely faded away. In 1923-4, however, as though anticipating this transformation, both Aleksei Tolstoi and Iakov Protazanov consciously imbued their fantastical works with enunciated realism.

In Tolstoi's narrative, a realist approach is first exhibited through the introduction of a conceptually sound invention. The author offers a description of the propulsion mechanism for his spacecraft in detail:

The engine mechanism was in a spiral-entwined funnel. The funnel was cast of metal that was even harder than astronomical bronze. Vertical canals were drilled into the walls of the funnel. Each widened on top into a so-called combustion chamber. Each chamber had a spark plug from an ordinary magnet and a feed tube. Just as a motor's cylinders use gasoline, these combustion chambers fed on ultralyddite, a fine powder of extraordinary explosive power, discovered in the B— Laboratories in Petrograd. The strength of the ultralyddite was greater than any other known explosive. The cone of the explosion was extremely narrow. In order to keep the axis of the cone of combustion in line with the axes of the funnel's vertical canals, the ultralyddite passed through a magnetic field before entering the combustion chambers (Tolstoi 1922, 108-109).

This fictional invention involves the use of "ultralyddite," a non-existent substance that is based on picric acid, and a rocket mechanism, later described by astrophysicists as a model for a pulse detonation engine.<sup>7</sup> The design of this engine is described in sufficient detail to make it appear like a real invention; instead of describing a fantastical mechanism in indefinite terms, Tolstoi offers an inherently believable design to his readers. In the following decades, this technique of

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<sup>7</sup> Real-world models for pulse detonation engines – some of them remarkably similar to Tolstoi's fictional device – were tested by both Soviet and Western scientists in the aftermath of World War II (Roy et al. 2004, 550). A functional pulse detonation engine developed for the American aerospace industry was tested in 2008 (G. Norris 2008, 60).

describing or portraying inventions of science fiction in meticulous detail became a sort of pseudo-realistic artistic device.<sup>8</sup> As I will show in my analysis of Stalin-era cinema, *Aelita* provided a model for future authors and directors to employ pre-incipient technology as an effective means to skirt censorship restrictions in their portrayals of fantastic plots.

It would be a mischaracterization to say that Tolstoi's narrative is *predominantly* realist. The fauna on planet Mars, for instance, is described in almost purely fantastical terms. However, the humanoids in Tolstoi's novel are similar to their earthling counterparts in virtually every respect. Critically, these alien hominids act and react to the prevailing sociopolitical system in very human ways. Thus, when Princess Aelita's father and ruler of the planet, Tuskub, declares that the cities of Mars must be destroyed to save the planet, the Martians organize a revolt with clear parallels to the Russian Revolution. The abhorrent working conditions, imbalanced class stratification, and perceived capitalist nature of Martian society illustrated a familiar bureaucratic antagonist to Soviet audiences. It is on account of an empathy with the suffering masses of Mars that Gusev, a character who I believe is Tolstoi's attempt at a depiction of the new Soviet man, decides to organize and take part in the rebellion against the planet's elites.

Recognizing the catastrophic consequences of the capitalist system of class oppression on Mars, Gusev states emphatically: "Revolution, Mstislav Sergeevich. The city is upside down. . . . What fun!" (Tolstoi 1923a, 77). The former Red Army soldier is portrayed as selfless, bold, and willing to sacrifice his life for a good cause – all essential characteristics of the new Soviet man.

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<sup>8</sup> Technical descriptions of pulse-detonation systems can also be found in subsequent periods of Russian *fantastika*, including in such works as *Taina dvukh okeanov* (1939) by Grigorii Adamov and *Obitaemyi ostrov* (1969) by Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii.

In Tolstoi's novel, Gusev's actions indicate that devotion to freedom and the elimination of oppression outweigh all other considerations for revolutionary heroes. The description of Gusev's valiant actions and ascetic worldview provide an archetype for the new Soviet man distinctly in line with Bolshevik theory in the 1920s. As such, the character presents a fitting representation of the worldview and ambitions that the Soviet bureaucracy hoped to instill in the working class of post-revolutionary Russia.

In Tolstoi's novel, the revolution on Mars ultimately ends in failure. Los has a dream in which Aelita commits suicide by drinking poison. Thereafter, the highest echelons of society suppress the revolt and destroy the revolutionary movement, forcing Los and Gusev to return to Earth. The men land on the shores of Lake Michigan, report their mission to Skiles, and begin a world tour devoted to sharing their experiences. However, in a conspicuous twist, the story ends with Los sitting at a receiver in St. Petersburg, attempting to decode a message from Mars in which Aelita calls to him. In contrast to Los's dream (in which Aelita poisons herself), this open-ended finale betrays a considerably more optimistic tone. This tone is shared by *Aelita's* adaptation and reflects a crucial trend in Soviet national identity at the time of its publication.

For a civilization that had lived under the authority of an autocratic tsar for nearly half a millennium, and had experienced almost a decade of constant war, the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922 bred hope for the future in Russian society. Particularly among a segment of the intelligentsia, experimentation in art and the expression of liberal ideas became a way to celebrate new-found freedoms in the post-Civil-War environment. I believe that it is for this reason that Maiakovskii and his avant-garde Futurists became a dominant literary force in the

early years of Soviet power, just as it is specifically because of the society-wide rejection of liberal optimism (in favor of realist conservatism) that the movement faltered by the end of the decade. In the same way, the adventurous plots and seemingly positive endings of both Tolstoi's novel and Protazanov's adaptation betray a rare glimpse into a period of Russian history in which optimism became a significant sociocultural phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately for Soviet society as a whole, it did not survive the cultural and political consequences of Lenin's death.

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<sup>9</sup> According to Richard Stites: "The optimism inherent in Marxism, the heady euphoria of the still fresh revolutionary years, the traditions of hope that ran through the old intelligentsia, and the realities of the dark landscape at hand all combined to infuse science fiction with what now seems to be a towering faith" (Stites 1989, 171).

### **Iakov Protazanov's *Aelita***

Iakov Protazanov's film adaptation of *Aelita*, which premiered 1924, reflects each of the artistic phenomena to which Trotskii refers in his *Literatura i revoliutsia* (cited above): it is both profoundly concerned with revolution and distinctly colored by a new attitude toward artistic production. The film's cubist sets, realist approach, cosmic scope, and revolutionary themes seem to fulfill the proposed aesthetics of early Soviet art perfectly. In spite of this, however, one Soviet literary critic derided the film in the following words: "On the way from the novel to film the philosophical substance and vivid juxtaposition of two worlds simply disappeared. The fantastic and everyday schemes did not produce an artistic contrast" (Vladimirtseva and Sandler 1969, 128). In refutation of this criticism, I posit that the opposite is true: *Aelita* succeeded in creating an artistic juxtaposition of civilizations, provided a positive portrayal of revolutionary action, and competently addressed issues that were at the heart of Soviet working-class identity. The critical reception that Protazanov's film received, rather, was an effect of the cultural shift toward conservatism that began with Lenin's death in the same year.

Premiering on the cusp of this major political transition, Protazanov's adaptation provides an excellent illustration of the post-Civil War sociocultural transformation. From the time of *Aelita's* filming to the beginning of the 1930s, certain aspects of the film's style, plot and message displeased members of the same bureaucracy that originally oversaw its creation. From an objective perspective, *Aelita* grants Soviet ideology and contemporary culture a preeminent place in its structure, negatively portrays capitalist society and "bourgeois" behavior, and

provides a positive message about modern Soviet man. Nonetheless, it was repeatedly attacked as an “imperialist” and “counter-revolutionary” film over the course of the following decades.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between Tolstoi’s novel and its adaptation is the latter’s increased focus on contemporary Soviet life. The better part of Protazanov’s film takes place on Earth, rather than on Mars; Moscow, the new center of the Soviet Union, replaces St. Petersburg as the primary setting; and the protagonist’s trip to Mars, rather than a fantastical interplanetary expedition, is portrayed as a mere daydream. These features add an element of verisimilitude to the film’s structure, framing a fantastical narrative in a predominantly realist plot. As such, they indicate a conscious effort on the part of the director to fulfill the wishes of the Soviet bureaucracy. Because realism was the preferred cinematic mode of Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and others, Protazanov created a film that was more focused on contemporary Soviet life than elements of *Aelita*’s underlying fantastic premise.

The scenes set in Moscow provide a complex picture of Soviet life in 1921. Protazanov portrays society naturalistically – exposing cultural imperfections but also highlighting positive traits. The heroes are dynamic and empathetic, the stages are modest and recognizable, and the actions of tertiary characters illustrate characteristic features of Russian culture. The primary narrative is intertwined with scenes of everyday life (*byt*) that offer a candid portrayal of post-Civil War Russian society: a destitute woman steals bread from an unattended sack, an over-packed train with dozens of workers on the roof arrives at a factory, and an “elite society” ball attended by lavishly-dressed officials and their female counterparts indicates the continued presence of capitalist greed in Soviet life. These images provide an artistic representation of a

society in the aftermath of war that is historically valuable in its own right. More importantly, however, they serve as a background against which Protazanov would develop a moral concerning the consequences of selfishness and greed in modern civilization.

The main narrative of Protazanov's adaptation follows Los, an engineer obsessed with the idea of creating a vehicle that would allow humankind to travel to Mars. The film opens with scenes of contemporary Moscow and a full-frame still that reads: "On December 4, 1921 at 6:27 p.m. Central European Time, radio stations on Earth received a strange signal" (Protazanov 1924). Working at the Moscow Radio Station, Los and his colleagues receive the message and are puzzled by its meaning. It reads "Anta . . . odeli . . . uta" – a conspicuous omen that regularly resurfaces throughout the narrative and spurs Los' fantasy to travel in space. The following scenes depict a bustling society in urban Moscow and introduce the secondary characters: Natasha, Los' wife; Spiridonov, his engineer colleague; and Gusev, a former Red-Army soldier. These characters embody characteristics that illustrate an optimism in the Soviet worldview and provide a positive depiction of the "post-revolutionary mentality" advocated by Trotskii.

The primary conflict of *Aelita* centers on a love triangle between Natasha, Los, and Erlikh. A greedy and corrupt public official, Erlikh is a bourgeois capitalist and the primary antagonist of the film. Erlikh abuses his authority as an official to steal sugar from the requisitions office and involves Natasha in the crime by hiding the loot in her cupboard. Attempting to woo her with wealth, Erlikh buys Natasha chocolate (an expensive rarity) and brings her to an "elite society" ball that caters to the affluent members of post-war society. His actions inspire jealousy in Los and cause him to doubt Natasha's fidelity. Moreover, this affair



drives Los further into his Martian fantasy, inspiring a series of dreams that dominate most of the narrative that follows.

The structure of *Aelita* makes it difficult to distinguish between Los' dreams and reality. However, it is clear that his dreams involve developments both in Moscow and on Mars. In one of Los' dreams, for instance, jealousy leads him to mistakenly kill Natasha; however, it is evident from the ending of the film that the murder is only part of Los' fantasy. The blending of fantasy and reality that is built into the plot forces the viewer to retrospectively evaluate the veracity of the film's events. This blending situates the realist narrative of Moscow in a non-realist framework and, as a result, the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, allowing for a more direct comparison between the events on Mars and those on Earth.

Los' visions of Mars provide an interesting contrast to the realities of contemporary Moscow. Aelita, a lavishly-dressed Martian princess, watches Earth through a telescope and obsesses over human culture. Tuskub, her authoritarian father, rules the planet as an autocrat and oversees the labor of an oppressed workforce. The Martian working class, when not performing labor for the planet's elites, are frozen in underground caves to await further assignments. It is for this reason that Tuskub views humankind as a threat, fearing the spread of "the ideology that led to revolution on Earth" (Protazanov 1924). In this way, a parallel is drawn between the Martian nobility and the upper-class elites whom the Bolsheviks had accused of oppressing the proletariat in Imperial Russia. The artistic parallel is made even more apparent when the workers of Mars, seeking freedom from an oppressive class-based society, instigate a revolution against Tuskub and the planet's elites.

The events that lead to revolution on Mars begin with the arrival of Los, Gusev, and Kravtsov. Kravtsov, an inept aspiring detective who is previously denied the opportunity to pursue a thief (Erlikh) who stole sugar from the requisitions office, finds himself on Mars after accidentally sneaking aboard Los' ship. Misunderstanding his new environment, the detective approaches the leaders of Mars and encourages them to arrest Los and Gusev. Instead, he is immediately imprisoned by Tuskub and sent to the underground caves that house the Martian laborers. In a parallel development, Aelita catches sight of the Soviet spacecraft as it lands and orders her servant to murder the only other witness of the heroes' arrival in order to thwart Tuskub's plan to eradicate them. Thereafter, she meets Los and Gusev, beginning an affair with the protagonist as the former Red Army soldier falls in love with Ikha, Aelita's servant. However, Aelita's murder of the telescope engineer compels Tuskub to suspect her involvement in hiding the earthlings, leading him to order Ikha's arrest. Gusev secretly follows Ikha to the caves and witnesses the injustices imposed on the working class, inspiring him to advocate for a revolution on Mars. The workers rally behind him, overthrowing their elitist overlords and destroying the mechanisms of oppression that had once been employed in their subjugation. In an obvious parallel to the events of 1917, the revolutionaries overthrow an authoritarian regime and became jubilant at the opportunity to live in freedom. At this point in the narrative, however, a striking turn of events destroys the constructed parallel between the Russian and Martian revolutions.

Aelita, witnessing the overthrow of the planet's elites, wrests control of the revolutionary movement from Gusev by rallying the proletariat and promising them freedom. However, instead

of emancipating the Martian workers, she commands the army to fire on the celebrating masses and forces them back into their prison caves. With the revolution destroyed, Aelita resumes control of the planet and states, “From now on, I alone will reign and rule” (Protazanov 1924). Los, disgusted by Aelita’s counter-revolutionary coup, kills her by throwing her from a set of stairs and promptly awakens from his fantastic dream. Now in Moscow, Los discovers that the events that he had witnessed on Mars were pure fantasy, and the cryptic phrase from the beginning of the film (Anta . . . Odeli . . . Uta) was simply an advertisement for a brand of tires. Transformed by his experiences, Los makes up with Natasha, burns his plans for a spaceship, and promises to stop daydreaming.

Aelita’s actions illustrate the possible consequences of a working-class revolution disconnected from socialist ideology. The suppression of the revolt by an authoritarian leader after the fact demonstrates the fragility of freedom in the aftermath of revolution. Through a juxtaposition of Martian and Russian civilizations, the events on Mars indicate that the Soviet Union was also in peril of becoming subject to a new oppressor. One might argue that, with this apparent parallel, Protazanov intended to provide a subtle connection between Aelita and Aleksander Kerensky, the leader of the Provisional Government in the months between the February and October revolutions. More importantly to our investigation, however, a clearer comparison might be made between Aelita and the Soviet leader who had established himself as autocratic ruler of the Soviet Union by the end of the decade: Joseph Stalin.

Protazanov’s adaptation indicates a fundamentally accurate understanding of post-revolutionary ideology. However, policies and initiatives adopted following Lenin’s death bred

authoritarianism. Stalin's rise to power created the circumstances that precipitated the rapid rise of vertical power structures in both the political and cultural spheres. Moreover, as a cult of personality developed around Stalin and he was established as the center of these power structures, the voices of former revolutionaries and early Bolshevik theorists (including Trotskii) were drowned out. It is for this reason that the anti-bureaucratic and anti-authoritarian messages manifested in early Soviet art (and evident in *Aelita*) disappeared from the national cultural dialogue by the end of the decade.

In the historical context that I have just described, it is easy to see why Stalin and his supporters might have disliked *Aelita*'s revolutionary message. Mirroring Princess Aelita's usurpation of authority, Stalin effectively silenced the Soviet proletariat in the late 1920s and forced them into similarly desperate working conditions through industrialization and collectivization. His violent oppression of dissent through the army, secret police, and gulag prison system also reveals a striking similarity between the actions of Aelita and the Soviet dictator. From this perspective, the fact that Princess Aelita is murdered in Protazanov's film might have been considered an impetus for Soviet citizens to rebel against their own elitist oppressor. Thus, in the context of the significantly more conservative and centralized political system of the late 1920s, the film's revolutionary message came to be viewed as a challenge to the established order. It is for this reason, rather than any ideological shortcomings in the film

itself, that *Aelita* was denounced and ultimately removed from circulation under Stalin's leadership.<sup>10</sup>

Against the backdrop of the theories on Russian national identity presented in the introduction, it is possible to identify other probable justifications for the criticisms leveled against *Aelita*. First of all, the entirety of Protazanov's narrative is framed in the context of the protagonist's personal experiences. Los' family struggles, aspirations to travel, dreams of Mars, and ultimate rejection of plans to build a spaceship are all related to the viewer through a singular perspective. Taking into account Bibler's theories concerning the struggle of the individual against the "people" (*narod*) in the context of Russian statehood, one might argue that the Soviet leadership believed that *Aelita* devoted too much attention to Los as an individual and not enough attention to the Soviet people as a collective.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, if an emphasis on the individual may have been acceptable in the booming years of the New Economic Policy, which permitted limited individual enterprise in the years following the Civil War, it was condemned by Stalin and his supporters with the inauguration of forced collectivism and industrialization. For this reason, *Aelita* came to be viewed as a symbol for an improper interpretation of Bolshevik ideology as the transition to conservatism took place over the course of the decade.

The final point that I will make in this chapter concerning *Aelita* may be illustrated through an examination of the agency granted to Princess Aelita in Protazanov's adaptation. In

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<sup>10</sup> Protazanov's *Aelita* was removed from the official Soviet register of circulating films in 1936 (referred to as the *Repertuarnyi ukazatel'*), but there is evidence that it was no longer circulating at this point (Katsigras and Rozhdestvenskii 1936).

<sup>11</sup> The journal *Trud*, for instance, appears to challenge the film for this exact reason (*Trud* 1924).

contrast to Tolstoi's novel, in which Aelita's rebellion is defeated and her only action is to commit suicide, the film portrays her as a dynamic and powerful character. Moreover, by subtly replacing the oddly-adorned figure of Aelita with an image of Natasha in scenes that take place on Mars, Protazanov draws a correlation between the film's two primary heroines. In this way, *Aelita* illustrates another major facet of early Bolshevik ideology that seemingly vanished with the rise of conservatism in the 1920s: in the new Soviet society, women were to be granted equal rights and the same types of authority traditionally exercised by men.

It is a well-known fact that the Soviet Union was the first nation-state to institute women's suffrage in the modern era. However, it was not solely on account of Bolshevik policies that women were given rights on par with their male counterparts. On the contrary, Russia had a tradition of feminist activism that had sought to empower women since at least the early nineteenth century (Stites 1978, 30). Aleksandr Herzen, Nikolai Chernyshevskii, Lev Tolstoi, and Nikolai Leskov, among others, sought to promote a positive perspective on women's equality through literature. Moreover, in the decades preceding the Russian Revolution, feminist organizations including the Charity Association of Russian Women (a political organization disguised as a charity) and the All-Russian League for Women's Equality had a significant impact on the perception of a woman's role in society. It is important to remember that, in the aftermath of the February Revolution of 1917, it was the Provisional Government that originally established women's suffrage in Russia. Moreover, while Bolshevik ideology imagined a world in which men and women would provide equal labor in the socialist system, a major disconnect

between dogma and practice developed in the second half of the 1920s. Historian David

Gillespie writes:

In the 1920s female roles were not all continuations of the passive, suffering domestic stereotypes that were still very common in pre-revolutionary film and literature. . . . In the films of the ‘golden age’ it is the image of the politically active woman that is best remembered. . . . The Revolution was meant to free women from domestic slavery, but in the 1930s the cause of female emancipation was one the successors of Lenin treated with typical bombast but also equivocation. The woman was entitled to work and be financially independent, but she should not forget bringing up the children and providing the center of the nuclear family: the ‘double’ burden that many Russian women face to this day (Gillespie 2003, 83-85).

In parallel with the cultural and political movements toward conservatism, the struggle for equal treatment of women began to wane in Soviet society with the implementation of Stalin’s first five-year plan. In the portion of this chapter that focuses on the second period of *fantastika* film adaptation, I will attempt to provide an explanation for this phenomenon through an analysis of the agency granted female characters in the art of the Stalin era. In the context of my analysis of *Aelita*, however, I posit that the post-revolutionary worldview exhibited signs of a positive attitude toward female empowerment. Considering the fact that this attitude toward feminism has not reemerged as a dominant cultural force in the nearly one-hundred years since, I believe that this facet of Protazanov’s adaptation illustrates a unique feature of the Soviet worldview in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution.

Deplored by the censors and embraced by the public, Iakov Protazanov’s *Aelita* is a unique artifact in my examination of Russian cinematic national identity. Just as the history of its labored production and critical reception illustrates a shift in one aspect of sociocultural life (i.e. artistic criticism), a detailed examination of its plot elucidates some of the defining features of

the early Soviet worldview. My analysis of *Aelita* has illustrated some of the means by which the plots, characters, and production histories of *fantastika* films may be dissected to reveal features of important sociocultural and political shifts in Soviet history. Moreover, it has demonstrated that a juxtaposition of film adaptations with their original literary sources may serve as an effective avenue for evaluating popular worldviews concurrent with any given period. In the following section, I will provide further justification for these approaches in my examination of works from the second period of *fantastika* film adaptation: the Stalin era.



## **Stalinist Identity: Socialist Realism and the Nadir of *Fantastika* Fiction (1930-1956)**

“At first unnoticed, Stalin’s power grew throughout the 1920s, and by the end of the decade Stalinism brought disaster to Soviet SF” (McGuire 1987, 426).

It is difficult to discuss Soviet national identity without reference to Joseph Stalin.

Policies enacted under his leadership resulted in some of the greatest achievements and most heinous atrocities known to the modern world. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that his actions alone were responsible for the transformations that took place in Soviet culture over the course of his rule. My analysis of the second period of *fantastika* film adaptation will seek to prove that, while Stalin was a fundamental impetus for change, the evolution of the Soviet worldview in the period from 1930 to 1956 was influenced by a considerably more complex amalgamation of sociocultural factors. I will illustrate my argument with an analysis of two *fantastika* film adaptations that span the period hereafter referred to as the “Stalin era”: *Gibel’ sensatsii* (1935) and *Taina dvukh okeanov* (1955-56).

If the transition toward ideological conservatism was born with Lenin’s death in 1924, it can be said to have reached maturity by 1932. According to Birgit Beumers:

The 1930s were marked by terror and fear, arrests and executions. By 1932, the Cultural Revolution that had begun in 1929 had led to all artistic movements being streamlined into monolithic artistic unions (writers, filmmakers, artists, composers, etc.) that would ultimately implement the Party’s ideology rather than defend their members from political interference in art, as stipulated in a party decree of 1932 (Beumers 2009, 75).

The Bolshevik party, as earlier noted, established a censorship apparatus to oversee all forms of artistic production just over a month after the October Revolution. However, one of the

consequences of the shift toward conservatism that took place over the course of the 1920s was a significant tightening of censorship. This led to the virtual elimination of all liberal and experimental artistic currents by 1932 and, in 1934, socialist realism officially became the sole legitimate form of art in the Soviet Union (Clark 1981, 27). From this point until 1956, the party bureaucracy ruthlessly oppressed any output that did not meet the (ever-changing) stipulations of this artistic mode.

One of the primary consequences of state-enforced socialist realism was a major decline in film production in the Soviet Union as a whole. According to historian Peter Kenez, in the Stalin era “relatively few movies were made. In the 1920s approximately one hundred a year; in the 1930s output diminished to approximately forty annually. The industry reached its nadir in the 1950s, when it produced no more than seven films yearly” (Kenez 2001, 3). While one might mention a comparable decline in the realm of *fantastika* literature (McGuire 1987, 426), this data clearly illustrates the overwhelmingly negative consequences that this policy had on Soviet sociocultural production. The restrictions of socialist realism and the pressure on artists to produce ideologically sound works decimated the artistic community and created an environment of anxiety for those who dared to function as Soviet artists.

As a non-realist genre, *fantastika* was gradually repressed in the 1930s. Works that had enjoyed considerable popularity in the previous decade were removed from circulation, and the production of new material was overseen by a bureaucracy that was hostile to all forms of non-realist art. Writers and directors of *fantastika* who succeeded in navigating the censorship, moreover, often became the target of criticism that framed their work as “decadent” (i.e.

unintelligible to the proletariat), “counter-revolutionary” or “anti-Soviet.” This, in addition to an atmosphere of fear created by state terror, contributed to a monumental decline in *fantastika* production as a whole. The few examples of *fantastika* film adaptation that survive from this period, therefore, may be viewed as unique artifacts in the history of Soviet cinema.

Before undertaking an analysis of *Gibel’ sensatsii* and *Taina dvukh okeanov*, we must introduce a term that will play a crucial role in our examination of Soviet identity in the Stalin era. *Fantastika blizhnego pritsela (FBP)*, which might be translated as “fantasy of the near future,” is a subgenre that includes works of *fantastika* produced during the Stalin era under the requirements of socialist realism. Developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s, this term was retroactively applied as a label to all *fantastika* produced after 1930. Sergei Ivanov, one of the original theorists of this subgenre, described it in the following way:

Soviet science fiction should display the future of our country, the lives of our people. Specifically tomorrow, that is, the period of time separated from the present day by one or two decades, maybe even simply by years. . . . Realistic fantasy, standing directly on the "edge of what is possible," makes the reader endure hardship along with the characters in the stories, celebrate achievements, admire the valor, the courage of the Soviet people, who are moving science and technology forward (Ivanov 1950, 159).

The primary feature of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*, therefore, is a realistic approach to fantastic subjects. Its mission, which is best summed up by the following citation from Wikipedia, was to fulfill a singular function in society:

According to this concept, formulated by a group of Soviet critics and writers at the end of the 1940s and early 1950s, the main goal of *fantastika* literature was to popularize achievements of modern Soviet science and technology and their development in the near future. For fiction this area is characterized by interest in scientific and technical detail, and weak psychological treatment of characters, who play a secondary role in the work. As a rule, the action of the works takes place in the

near future and revolves around descriptions of inventions useful for the national economy (Wikipedia 2019).<sup>12</sup>

*Fantastika blizhnego pritsela* served an important utilitarian purpose for the Soviet government. It provided a space in which inventions of science fiction and pseudo-fantastic premises could be used to inspire Soviet scientists and the educated youth, while simultaneously glorifying the achievements of the socialist system and the new Soviet man. Moreover, as the only permissible form of *fantastika*, this subgenre faced no real competition on the domestic market.

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<sup>12</sup> The anonymous author is drawing his or her description in part from the essay by S. Ivanov cited above (Ivanov 1950).

## Vladimir Vladko's *Idut roboty*

*Gibel' sensatsii* is based on a novella written by Ukrainian author Vladimir Nikolaevich Eromchenko, better known by his pseudonym Vladimir Vladko. Because the title of the novella has led to some confusion in the past, let us begin with a short summary of its publication history. *Idut' robotari*, Vladko's original novella, was published in Ukrainian in 1929 and won a republic-wide award for literature in the same year (Karatsupa and Levchenko 2011, 225). In 1931, a full translation into Russian and a second edition in Ukrainian became available under the title *Idut roboty*. A year after the premier of Andrievskii's adaptation, a new version appeared in 1936 with multiple revisions. Finally, in 1967 the novella was significantly expanded and republished as a novel entitled *Zheleznyi bunt* (ibid.).

Unfortunately, on account of the multiple titles and editions, academic analyses of Vladko's novella and Andrievskii's adaptation have often been confusing and contradictory. Western and Soviet critics have relied on different editions in their commentary, and some have even anachronistically cited *Zheleznyi bunt* (published over thirty years after the premier of *Gibel' sensatsii*) in their analyses of its adaptation. To avoid any confusion, therefore, my examination will consider the version of Vladko's novella that was most likely to be available to the directors and screenwriters in 1935: *Idut roboty*, published by the youth literature journal *Molodoi chelovek*<sup>13</sup> in 1931. It is unlikely that my reader is familiar with this edition, and no

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<sup>13</sup> Virtually all the works of Soviet *fantastika* fiction discussed in this dissertation were originally aimed at children and young adults. *Molodaia gvardiia*, *Molodoi bolshevik*, *Molodoi chelovek*, and *Detskaia literatura* were among the most successful publishers of *fantastika* literature during the Soviet era. While aimed at a young readership, however, many of the works contain themes inaccessible to immature audiences.

translations into English were ever produced. Thus, I begin my analysis of *Idut roboty* with a summary of its basic plot. My exposition will provide the foundation for a juxtaposition with *Gibel' sensatsii* and, more importantly, will illustrate key features of a critically successful text that rose to popularity on the cusp of the first and second periods of *fantastika* film adaptation.

*Idut roboty* opens with an event that introduces the protagonist, antagonist, and primary conflict of the novella. Tim Crony,<sup>14</sup> a journalist for the communist *Red Star* magazine in New York, bursts into the home office with urgent information for the editor.

The machine manufacturing plant of Jonathan Gowers is preparing for the production of its first batch of mechanical robot-people. . . . According to our information, these robots are capable of replacing living workers in the factory production line. The mechanism of this extraordinary invention is a secret of Gower's company. However, it is known that Gower's robots move with the help of electricity, which they receive through an antenna without any form of wiring. It has been reported that, in the near future, Gower's company will attempt to put the first batch of these iron men on the production line (Vladko 1931, 2).

After a conversation about the possible consequences of a robotic workforce, Tim accepts an assignment to pursue the story and travel to "New Harris" (a fictional city in the United States) to report on a strike instigated by the laborers of Gower's factory.

Tim is surprised when he learns that Gowers has offered him a private interview – especially considering his communist affiliations – but eagerly prepares to meet the reclusive capitalist and learn the truth about the rumored inventions. In Gower's office, Tim challenges the

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<sup>14</sup> I have chosen to translate proper nouns in my discussion of *Idut roboty* rather than use standard Russian transliteration. This is because the titles of people, cities, streets, etc. are themselves imitations of transliterations for common Anglo-American names. Furthermore, it would be misleading to offer transliterations from this edition because they are not accurate representations of the names that Vladimir Vladko used in his original novella. On account of phonological and linguistic differences between the Ukrainian and Russian languages, the Russian translation of *Idut roboty* is not a reliable source for the intended spelling or pronunciation of these names.

factory owner to prove the existence of his robot laborers by suggesting that the rumors surrounding their development were part of a ploy by the company to influence the striking labor union. In response to these accusations, Gowers reveals that one of his inventions is present in the office. While demonstrating the robot's ability to ambulate and move anthropomorphically, Gowers rails against the striking laborers and describes his vision of the future.

It means that I can order (the robot) to strangle you – and he will do it. I can order him to throw himself from a twentieth-story window – and he will do so. This is not your typical worker, babbling “what” and “how.” This is my iron slave. If I place him on the production line – he will work and not ask for a raise because that is nothing to him. They are mine; do you understand? Only mine – and no sort of labor union can persuade them to stop fulfilling my orders. I spit on all of your strikes! . . . He will fulfill all. He is the victory of capitalism over all your socialism and communism. The iron worker will be victorious in everything. Try to fight him and he will crush you. The robot is the future of capitalism, which has already begun. With him I do not fear anything or anyone (Vladko 1931, 6-7).

Gower's monologue betrays an openly antagonistic view toward socialism and the working class, marking him as the principal antagonist. For the remainder of the narrative, Tim and the laborers of New Harris struggle to thwart Gowers and his mechanical robot army.

On the way to deliver a report on the contents of his interview, Tim experiences a hallucination. He sees a police officer conducting traffic in the center of the street but, rather than a living person, the officer appears as one of Gower's robots. This omen of a capitalist future inspires Tim to travel immediately to New Harris, the city that houses Gower's factory. On the train, he reads a newspaper article critical of the labor strikes and encounters a childhood friend. Thomas Biers, a former classmate, reveals himself to be the inventor of the power source that

enables Gower's robots to function, also divulging that he intends to meet with their shared former love-interest – Madeline Strand.

Perhaps the most dynamic character in Vladko's novella, Madeline Strand may be viewed as a proverbial "moral compass." A radio-wave engineer from a working-class background, Madeline is originally uninterested in political issues but drawn to Tim's passionate devotion to his ideals. Her transformation into an ardent supporter of socialism over the course of the novella (and the role she plays in the revolution) illustrates the virtue of Bolshevik ideology.<sup>15</sup> That is, although she benefits from the capitalist system as a privileged member of the intelligentsia, she chooses to side with the working class because she is convinced of the rightness of their cause. However, when Thomas Biers first reveals to her that Gower's robots are functional, she appears completely unconcerned by his boisterous anti-communist rantings.

Back in the offices of *Red Star*, Tim and members of the labor union discuss the robot workers and a possible means to stop them. They are interrupted by the entrance of the director of Gower's factory, who warns them that the robots will be put on the production line the following day if the strike is not cancelled. This leads to chaos among those assembled, and Tim decides that he must personally secure Madeline's assistance to create a device capable of taking control of the robots.

The following day a militia arrives at Gower's factory and attempts to disperse the striking workers and curious bystanders. The soldiers unload the robots from a truck and

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<sup>15</sup> This transformation is similar to that of Marion Dixon in Grigorii Aleksandrov's 1936 film *Tsirk*. A talented American woman is inspired by the working class and ultimately adopts socialist (i.e. Bolshevik) ideology.



command them to walk into the factory, drawing the attention of the assembled crowd. Tim agitates against the robots and attempts to convince the crowd that they will be used as a tool of oppression. Nonetheless, the unstoppable iron workers enter the factory and begin to operate the production line.

Madeline returns home to find Tim waiting for her. He attempts to convince her of the merits of revolting against Gowers by bringing up her working-class background. Calling him a fanatic, Madeline refuses to help Tim develop a controller for the robots. In response to his accusations that she is betraying her class, however, Madeline claims that she does not love Thomas Biers and will not side with the capitalist factory owners.

The following portion of the novella cites from three fictional journals in New Harris: *Red Star*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *Stock News*. Representing communist, capitalist, and imperialist perspectives respectively, these journals provide vastly disparate reports on the situation concerning Gower's robots and the striking workers.<sup>16</sup> Like Protazanov's adaptation of *Aelita*, Vladko's novella employs a fictional location as the setting for a juxtaposition of dogmatic concepts. Considering the fact that promoting anti-communist political ideologies was a serious crime, this was a bold and effective strategy to introduce ideas that would have been otherwise unacceptable to Soviet censors and the bureaucracy as a whole in the late 1920s.

The narrative resumes with a meeting in the labor union hall that is interrupted when a robot opens the door and walks into the room. It is accompanied by a line of identical machines

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<sup>16</sup> These journals are historically valuable particularly on account of the fact that they reflect a Soviet artist's interpretation of what American news might look like.

that stand ominously in the passageway. The telephone rings and it is revealed that Biers has taken control of the machines. He begins to berate the labor union and the striking workers, threatening them with a deadline the following morning. He declares that the army will be brought in to break the strike and that the robots will attack any workers who attempt to remain. The laborers, terrified by this prospect, convince Tim that Madeline is their only hope in defeating the robots. Madeline agrees to help Tim after he convinces her that the robots are not simply a workforce, but also a dangerous military weapon.

In Gower's factory, Biers witnesses a malfunction in the robot workers that he ascribes to magnetic interference. He catches Tim and Madeline sneaking around the factory, but does nothing to stop them from leaving. In Madeline's apartment it is revealed that she has invented a type of video transmitter. She uses the device to introduce Tim to a representative from the "Red Country" (i.e. the Soviet Union). Comrade Akimov promises to assist the labor union, claiming that he will test the robots' vulnerability to radio waves by broadcasting signals at a particular time each day. Tim's conversation is interrupted by the leader of the labor union, Bob Leslie. He explains that the police have seized all of the labor union's facilities and that the strike committee has been arrested with the help of the robots.

In New York, Gowers is informed that the arrests have only served to further agitate the workers and citizens of New Harris. He sends a representative, Gordon Blake, to help Biers take control of the situation. Blake, a regional infantry officer, criticizes Biers' handling of the labor union and demands the arrest of Bob, Tim, and Madeline. He interrogates one of the arrested

members of the labor committee (Mike Tisman) and threatens to eliminate Biers if he does not follow orders. While searching for Tim, Blake encounters Madeline and has her arrested.

In prison, Madeline has an epiphany and realizes that she can take control of the robots. However, Blake orders that she be moved to a secure location to avoid any chance that she might make contact with the labor union. Meanwhile, Tim establishes a plan with the help of Comrade Akimov to eliminate the robots the following day. Biers arrives at Madeline's apartment and learns that she has been arrested, prompting him to call Blake and demand her release. When Blake refuses, suggesting that he intends to torture her, Biers goes to the prison and forcefully takes her into his custody.

The workers discover that the robots and an armed militia are guarding the factory. Nonetheless, they prepare to fight. The strikers are attacked on the street by an anti-communist militia, but succeed in stealing an armored vehicle and reaching their destination. Meanwhile, Gowers arrives from New York and reassumes control of the robots. Outside of New Harris, the army awaits orders to storm the city and restore order. It is revealed that many of the soldiers support the striking workers and have planned to join the rebellion at the opportune moment. At the train station, weapons provided by the Red Country arrive from New York. A few soldiers also come to the station as defectors and warn the workers that the army is entering the city. The workers celebrate their victory over a small fascist militia and prepare to attack Gower's factory the next day.

Gowers and Biers remain inside the factory with Madeline as their hostage while the workers gather at the gates. The robots are sent into the street to face them but, to the surprise of

their capitalist inventors, they turn around and join the workers in their assault. The radio-transmitter designed by Madeline and broadcast with the help of the Red Country puts the robots under the control of the workers. Gowers and Biers are killed by their own inventions and Madeline is saved. The novella ends abruptly after the laborers overthrow the factory.

The defining feature of Vladko's novella is a positive portrayal of socialism and revolutionary action. The workers, soldiers, and regular citizens of New Harris rise up against Gowers because of the conditions imposed by their capitalist society. Tim and Bob, the primary agitators for revolution, are portrayed as heroic visionaries. Madeline Strand, a political skeptic and the sole female character in the novella, becomes convinced of the virtue of the socialist cause. Moreover, assistance from the "Red Country" (i.e. the Soviet Union) plays a key role in the success of the revolution. These factors combine to create a universally positive portrayal of socialist practice. In accordance with the Soviet government's goals for artistic literature in the late 1920s, socialist revolution plays a central role in *Idut roboty*.

Realism is also a defining feature of Vladko's novella. New Harris is described as if it were a real city in the United States – with common American street names and recognizable locations. The characters encounter situations familiar to Soviet audiences and react to their circumstances in predictable ways. In the novella's citations from three fictional journals, detailed analyses of the sociopolitical and socioeconomic situations in New Harris read as if they were truly written by American journalists (with corresponding pro-capitalist perspectives). Gower's robots – the singular fantastic element of the novella – are described in meticulous technical detail. Like the rocket mechanism in Aleksei Tolstoi's *Aelita*, they are depicted as

plausible inventions. However, whereas in *Aelita* dense technical descriptions were used to grant greater realism to a predominantly fantastic plot, in *Idut roboty* this technique served to justify a fantastic invention in a decidedly realist narrative.

The positive reception, wide publication, and uninhibited circulation of Vladko's novella (even throughout the Stalin era) indicates that it fulfilled the prescriptions of socialist realism and was considered useful by the bureaucracy.<sup>17</sup> However, it also sought to express ideas that were well beyond the borders of the acceptable in the era in which it was produced. For instance, one might argue that Biers, an unapologetic capitalist and enemy of the socialist cause, is portrayed in a heroic light when he saves Madeline from Blake's torture. This would seem to indicate that even corrupt capitalists are capable of self-sacrifice and empathy – an idea rejected by Soviet propaganda in the late 1920s. One might also argue that America is portrayed as more technologically advanced than Russia, with Thomas Biers and Madeline Strand representing the educated elite. Finally, as noted in my summary, the digression that includes three American periodicals presents (pro-capitalist) perspectives considered taboo in Soviet cultural dialogue.

My research suggests that Vladko's novella resonated with the Soviet public as a whole on account of both its pro-revolutionary and subversive messages. On the one hand, the realist narration of the revolution in New Harris and its prominent pro-Soviet worldview fulfilled the wishes of the Bolshevik bureaucracy. On the other hand, detailed perspectives on capitalist civilization provided a window into an ideology that was considered the primary enemy of the

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<sup>17</sup> Although the novella was published in revised form in 1936, my research indicates that earlier versions were neither removed from circulation nor subject to criticism for ideological shortcomings in the 1930s (as were Protazanov's *Aelita* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *Rokovye iaitsa* – discussed in Chapter 3).

Soviet state. Rather than an escape into fantasy, Vladko surreptitiously offered his readers a glimpse into other common ideological approaches to societal organization. While this might suggest that the censorship apparatus was negligent in vetting Vladko's novella, however, *Idut roboty*'s popular success and broad circulation indicate that the Soviet government considered it an ideologically sound and useful expression of the Bolshevik worldview.

### Aleksander Andrievskii's *Gibel' sensatsii*

Aleksander Andrievskii's *Gibel' sensatsii*, also known as *Robot Dzhima Ripl'*, premiered in 1935. In a period of extreme censorship, it was the only *fantastika* film produced in that year to continue circulation in 1936 (Katsigras and Rozhdestvenskii 1936, 18). As such, it is a rare example of *fantastika* cinema approved by the bureaucracy in the middle of a decade defined by purges, mass imprisonment, and overwhelming censorship of the arts.

Andrievskii's adaptation of *Idut roboty*, while similar to the original in thematics and ideological drive, may be examined in the context of some of its primary innovations. One of the most revealing differences may be viewed through the lens of Vladimir Bibler's theories concerning Russian statehood. As I mentioned in the introduction, Bibler asserted that the Russian cultural mentality is inherently anti-individualistic, particularly in respect to governmental authority and ideology. In his model of Russian national identity, "the people" (*narod*) refers to a collective force which implies "a negation of the sovereignty of the individual" (Bibler 2004, 62). As the government became more and more involved in the daily lives of the population and the Soviet state became increasingly oppressive over the course of the 1930s, individualism was suppressed in favor of collectivism. My analysis of *Gibel' sensatsii* seeks to contextualize the impact that this anti-individualist aspect of Stalinist ideology had on Soviet *fantastika* cinema in the mid-1930s. Allow me to begin with a short summary.

Jim Ripple, the primary protagonist of Andrievskii's film, is an idealist engineer in an unnamed American city. He has a working-class background, is a member of a labor committee, and believes that an unprecedented invention will one day cause a revolution and destroy

capitalism in his country. Ripple develops a small robot (nicknamed “Micro”) that is capable of performing basic tasks at the command of a whistle, and exhibits this invention to the local labor committee and members of his family. However, instead of embracing the new device, his comrades label him a turncoat:

Jack: Jim, who is this for?

Jim: For you. From the machine, capitalism makes a weapon for the enslavement of workers. The machine relentlessly assails mankind. I am making a leap in the development of technology that will change everything. I made an automaton that can do anything. It will make almost all of the workers in the factory superfluous. What will happen? World markets will overflow. Prices will fall catastrophically. And, without any barricade fights or revolution, capitalism will cease to exist.

Jack: Today a man told me that you were a traitor. I called him a liar. But it seems that I was mistaken. We educated you, and you thought up a way to throw us all out on the street.

Jim: The machines are for you.

Jack: For us? Don’t they have the power? Did you really forget about prison, about the police, and about the thousands of unemployed?

Jim: You will make the machines.

Jack: No. The hands of your machine will be the hands of capital, which will strangle us sooner than capital itself dies according to your formula.

(Andrievskii 1935)

Ripple is disowned by friends and family but refuses to abandon his plan to liberate the masses with automated labor. He obtains a position as a researcher for a large company and continues to develop robots with funding from anonymous capitalist donors.

Six months later, Ripple exhibits his new robot (labeled “R.U.R.”)<sup>18</sup> to a group of leaders in the military-industrial complex. The new inventions are much larger and more efficient, capable of drawing a perfect circle and obeying complex commands from a saxophone. The capitalists decide to mass-produce them and put Ripple in charge of a secret factory. They hire

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<sup>18</sup> A nod to Czech author Karl Capek’s 1920 play *R.U.R. (Rossumovi univerzální roboti)*.



African and Asian workers to construct the robots, believing that the local workers will strike if they realize what is being made. The labor union, which discovers their plan almost immediately, seeks to find a way to take control of Ripple's invention.

Ripple sends a letter to his sister, Claire, asking her to meet him at the factory. When she arrives, he introduces her to the robots, demonstrating his ability to operate them remotely by using radio waves and a television. However, while Claire is impressed by the inventions, she expresses a fear that they will be used to harm the working class. Convinced himself that he will be able to take control of the robots if they are turned against the labor union, Ripple uses a saxophone to make them dance in unison for his amusement. Meanwhile, Roy, a spy for the labor union, sneaks into the factory and discovers a means to control the robots with radio signals. Thereafter, a strike is organized at the factory.

Ripple's robots are put to work on the production line. In an exhibition to the public, however, one of the robots under Ripple's control crushes a member of the crowd. The strike turns into a riot and members of the military fire on the crowd, killing several bystanders. A revolution breaks out as the military and robot army begin an assault on the village that houses the factory workers. Ripple attempts to stop the robots with his saxophone, but is crushed by one of his own inventions in the process. However, the labor union, using information gained from Roy's secret mission and the research of proletarian scientists, takes control of the robots and turns them against their oppressors. Ripple's inventions, which had been used to threaten and oppress the working class, become instruments of their liberation. In a scene of glorious

revolution, the workers overcome the military with the help of the R.U.R. robots and the film ends with the defeat of the capitalist enemy.

In a major departure from Vladko's *Idut roboty*, the characters of *Gibel sensatsii* are neither dynamic nor particularly well-developed. Instead of a narrative focused on the psychological motivations of individuals, the events of the film are shown to be motivated by broad cultural forces. Jim Ripple is a completely static character, bullheaded in his belief that the robots will save the working class, even until the moment of his death. Symbolizing the dangers of unguided individual enterprise, his ultimate destruction at the hands of his own invention serves as a warning to those who would elevate individualism over Soviet doctrine.

No other character undergoes any noticeable form of psychological transformation in Andrievskii's adaptation. There are no conversions to socialism (as we saw with Madeline Strand); no self-sacrifice or individually heroic actions on the part of the main characters (as with Tim Crony, Bob Leslie, and Thomas Biers); and no individual antagonists to serve as the face of the capitalist enemy (instead of Robert Gowers, a group of nameless representatives from the military-industrial complex are the primary enemy). Looking back to our definition of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*, this is an example of art that employs a "weak psychological treatment of characters, who play a secondary role in the work" (Wikipedia 2019). In comparison to Vladko's narrative, the psychology and actions of individual characters in Andrievskii's adaptation play a very minor role in the development of the narrative. In juxtaposition with Protazanov's *Aelita*, which was criticized for its focus on the perspective of a single character, the absence of dynamic figures and heroic portrayal of collective action in *Gibel' sensatsii* provide a powerful

illustration of the impact that Soviet ideology had on the development of *fantastika* film in the 1930s.

Another major difference between Vladko's novella and Andrievskii's adaptation is a total lack of female agency in the latter. Claire, a static replacement for Madeline Strand, is a forthright supporter of socialism from the outset of the film. Her role is as a simple observer, and she ultimately takes no part in the successful revolution (unlike Madeline, who plays a crucial role in developing a transmitter and contacting the Red Country). This would seem to indicate that, in parallel with the reduction of the role of the individual in Stalinist art, messages supporting female empowerment were systematically subordinated to other features of Soviet ideology. That is, in the significantly more conservative environment of the 1930s, the liberal messages of women's rights supporters and Bolshevik feminists came to play a lesser role in cultural production. In contrast to the optimistic years leading up to Lenin's death – or even the more restrained, but less conservative, late 1920s – *Gibel sensatsii* betrays a significantly less enthusiastic approach to the expansion of women's agency in mid-1930s society.

In the context of Chaadaev's theories on the fundamental separation between "us" – the Russian people, and "them" – the inhabitants of other economically developed countries, the setting of *Gibel sensatsii* appears to be a critical departure from Soviet propaganda in the mid-1930s. If a sense of inferiority to other nations is, as Nikolai Berdiaev claimed, a major feature of historical Russian identity, then the portrayal of American society in Andrievskii's adaptation could have only served to exacerbate this sensitivity.

The contrast between the laborers and their wealthy counterparts in New Harris is downplayed in the film. Individuals in the labor committee play only a minor role in the events leading up to the revolution, and the primary antagonists are military officers rather than wealthy businessmen. The strike organized by the workers calls for better wages and the destruction of the robots, but there is no real indication of a revolutionary movement and little to distinguish the more affluent members of this society from the “oppressed” labor force. Furthermore, the setting of *Gibel’ sensatsii* is dramatically more opulent than the one described in *Idut roboty*. The city is portrayed as clean and socially vibrant: the bourgeois inhabitants are meticulously well-dressed and the broad streets, new cars, and wide halls are markedly elegant. A scene involving a performance by a charismatic singer and rows of costumed dancers lasts a full two minutes, and background scenes portray American culture in a noticeably positive light.

Based on these features, one might argue that Andrievskii’s adaptation depicts this capitalist society too favorably – especially in the context of the real effects of the Great Depression in the United States. From one perspective, it can hardly be believed that the entertaining scenes set in this American city were meant to cause revulsion in the viewership; from another, it is an absolute certainty that the censorship apparatus would balk at the idea of portraying “them” (Americans) as superior to “us” (Soviets). One might argue that Andrievskii intended for these images of socioeconomic prosperity to illustrate a society corrupted by its own wealth. However, I believe that they indicate a purposeful departure from Soviet ideology on behalf of the director – an “unofficial” approach to the portrayal of the primary enemy of the communist party. That is, *Gibel’ sensatsii* provided an image of an affluent society that neither

wanted nor needed revolution before the introduction of the fantastic robot workers. In the context of Lenin's theories on world revolution, the proletarian revolt in Andrievskii's adaptation could be considered an ideological victory. However, in the middle of a decade dominated by Stalin's Marxist-Leninist theory of "Socialism in one country," the portrayal of western civilization in *Gibel' sensatsii* must be considered a critical departure from contemporary norms.

Andrievskii's adaptation glorifies revolutionary action and the victory of the working class over a capitalist oppressor. However, it also provides an image of a comparatively economically and socioculturally advanced civilization that is relatively disinterested in political dogma. The combination of official and unofficial messages may account, in part, for the work's modest level of popularity among Soviet audiences. At a time when pro-capitalist agitation was considered a serious crime, this adaptation provided a subtle commentary on alternative perspectives through a tactfully created pseudo-fantastic narrative.

Although *Gibel' sensatsii* is now regarded as an early example of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*, it is hard to see how it is representative of a genre that sought to "celebrate achievements, admire the valor, (and) the courage of the Soviet people, who are moving science and technology forward" (Ivanov 1950, 159). Especially in light of its positive portrayal of American culture, Andrievskii's adaptation illustrates a willingness on behalf of Soviet directors of *fantastika* to push boundaries in creating art and an eagerness on behalf of the Soviet public to be exposed to unofficial (i.e. not state-sanctioned) perspectives and worldviews. This indicates that, even in the considerably more conservative environment of the mid-1930s, in the midst of

Stalin's infamous purges, there was still a notable sociocultural force that sought to break from the confines of Bolshevik ideology.

If the goal of the Communist Party under Stalin was to indoctrinate and subjugate the masses to the Soviet cause, it is clear that the policies they enacted were only moderately successful. The Russian people, as a collective, refused to be bound by a single ideology. It is true that famine, violent purges, and mass incarceration created an environment in which the majority of citizens were afraid to publicly stray from the party line. However, even if the majority of those who survived outwardly adopted Soviet doctrine, a significant subversive movement persisted in the sociocultural environment into the following decades and beyond.

As I have attempted to illustrate in my limited examination of *Idut roboty* and *Gibel' sensatsii*, the same features of the Russian idea that were elucidated by Berdiaev, Chaadaev, and others continued to play a significant role in the cultural dialogue and artistic production of the conservative 1930s. Soviet society, while heavily influenced by communist propaganda, was significantly more complex and resilient than the bureaucracy that sought to control it. The conservative pressures implemented from above, while unquestionably powerful, served only to alter the manifestations of these features in art and popular culture.

### Grigorii Adamov's *Taina dvukh okeanov*

The Soviet media market of the 1930s can probably be divided into two periods. In the first half of the 1930s there still existed if not private then co-operative property in the print and film publishing. In the second half of the 1930s Stalin's censorship drew up nearly all the remaining artists under the banner of social(ist) realism. As for G. Adamov, there was no need to draw him up, because his ideas and thoughts were always in unison with "the Party's general line." The totalitarian regime of the second half of the 1930s demanded that the "masters of culture" fought public enemies and spies against the background of the construction of communism and the conquest of nature. And G. Adamov earnestly responded to this calling with his book *The Mystery of Two Oceans* (Fedorov 2015, 327-328).

First published in 1938, Grigorii Adamov's<sup>19</sup> *Taina dvukh okeanov* received favorable reviews and achieved broad dissemination, ultimately circulating in over twenty editions.<sup>20</sup> An iconic work of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*, it fulfilled the goals of the bureaucracy by glorifying Soviet ideology, science, and collective action in an alluring and entertaining plot. However, it also challenged contemporary norms by featuring complex psychological portraits – creating an individualist model within a pro-collectivist narrative. My analysis will highlight some of the ways that Adamov sought to redefine the collectivist/individualist paradigm: offering new ideas on Soviet identity while also conforming to a strict censorship regime.

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<sup>19</sup> Like Vladimir Vladko, "Grigorii Adamov" is a pen name. The author's true name is Abram Borukhovich Gibs.

<sup>20</sup> A small portion of *Taina dvukh okeanov* was first published by the journal *Znanie-sila* in April/May of 1938 (Adamov 1938a and Adamov 1938b). Subsequently, an abridged version was published by the youth magazine *Pionerskaia pravda* from May to September of that year. In 1939, *Detskaia literatura* released an officially-approved, unabridged edition as a stand-alone novel (Adamov 1939). By 1991, over 3.5 million copies had been printed in the Soviet Union (Karatsupa 2003).

Adamov's narrative follows the adventures of the Soviet wonder-submarine *Pioneer* as it sails around the world from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok, traversing both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The crew of the ship are a group of ethnically diverse military officers and experts in zoology, physics, oceanography, and other scientific fields. The *Pioneer* is outfitted with a plethora of fantastic instruments and devices promoted as ingenious inventions of Soviet science. These include an engine that allows the submarine to travel at the same speed as an express train, a spherical submersible observation vehicle, a pulse-detonation drive designed to cut through ice, advanced diving suits, and a series of rocket-propelled watercraft. Looking back to our definition of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*, Adamov's novel is one of the best examples in Soviet film history of a work that "popularizes achievements of modern Soviet science and technology and their development in the near future" (Wikipedia 2019).

Written in a realist mode, *Taina dvukh okeanov* is a combination of detective, thriller, and *fantastika* genres. The *Pioneer* is threatened by cunning saboteurs – spies from the Empire of Japan. The crew are clever and adventurous, and there is a great deal of action and intrigue. However, the greater part of the text is devoted to dense descriptions of underwater life and technical specifications of the devices that make the *Pioneer's* mission possible. In Alexander Fedorov's comparison of Adamov's *Taina dvukh okeanov* and Pipinashvili's film adaptation, he writes:

The techniques of visual language of the novel deserve special attention. The language of Adamov's novel is sometimes close to that of newspapers and sketches ("The captain looked through the radiogram and raised his pale face. He turned to the crew, cast a glance at these people, who became close and dear to him during the three month long unforgettable trip, and waving the sheet he exclaimed: "Listen to the radiogram



of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the government”), but suddenly is filled with picturesque descriptions of underwater life (“A transparent medusa as if cast out of the purest glass swam by. Its gelatinous body was bordered with delicate fringe, and its long tentacles were streaming like a bunch of colorful laces. . . . A small silver fish flashed by one of these gentle creatures, and the picture changed in an instant. . . . The tentacles contracted, drew into the mouth of the medusa, and in a moment Pavlik was watching the dark outlines of the digested fish inside the medusa” (Fedorov 2015, 332).

By describing the underwater universe with appealing visual imagery and dense technical jargon (from the fields of ichthyology, cetology, oceanography, seismology, and many more), Adamov promoted a rational and highly scientific approach to the unknown. Moreover, by employing Aleksei Tolstoi’s technique of describing fictional inventions in meticulous detail, he ensured his pseudo-scientific devices would appear sufficiently plausible to readers and Soviet censors. In *Taina dvukh okeanov*, elements of the fantastic are all but completely muted: virtually everything that exceeds the limitations of modern science is acknowledged (and justified), and everything that appears implausible is explained. Adamov’s unflinching, almost obsessive adherence to this formula illustrates the pressures faced by Soviet *fantastika* authors in the Stalin era. In attempting to fulfill to the stipulations of socialist realism, the author created a work of *fantastika* in which the fantastic is practically nonexistent.

The protagonist of Adamov’s novel, Pavel (commonly referred to as “Pavlik”), is a young Soviet boy rescued by the *Pioneer* in the first stage of its trip. He serves as the primary audience for the detailed descriptions of inventions and wildlife that characterize the work, and is virtually omnipresent in the novel’s action. On separate occasions, he is attacked by an octopus, a shark, and a whale. He survives being trapped in an underwater cave, is involved in the

unmasking of an on-board saboteur, and helps to rescue a distressed colleague at the novel's climax. As an innocent shipwreck victim caught up in an important mission, he is both a naïve observer and a heroic role model.

There is a clear transformation in Pavel's psychology over the course of the novel, as well as individual moments that mark changes in his worldview. The following is an example of one of these changes:

- And does the captain know that you have a journal?
- The Captain?! – Pavel looked at Tsoi with surprise. – Why? I don't even speak to Viktor Abramovich. I always write when he is on watch. You are the first to find out about this. And you promised me . . . you promised me not to tell anyone, Right? You won't tell anyone?
- I won't tell, to be sure. But you must tell the Captain yourself. And before the submarine arrives in Vladivostok, you will have to show him your journal. Do you really not know this rule? It is required for everyone who takes part in the voyage.
- Really? – Pavlik asked, becoming confused. – But I didn't know . . . why does the captain need to do this?
- You don't understand, Pavlik! After all, much on our submarine is secret: how it works and how it is armed. Imagine that you describe some of these secrets in detail in your diary. You could lose your notebook or have it stolen from you, and it may somehow end up in the hands of our enemies. . . . You know well that the enemy is watching us everywhere and watching everything that is done in our country: in our armed forces, our army and navy, in factories, which create weapons and equipment for them. The enemies always wish to attack our country, destroy our defenses – the army and navy – to rob our land and factories, to put us under the boot of the capitalists and landowners so that all of the Soviet people would work for them, so that poverty, unemployment, hunger, cold, humiliation, and slavery would again return to our beautiful country. . . . You must always remember this, Pavlik. You must always remember that we are surrounded by enemies.
- I will not write anything about the *Pioneer*, Tsoi! – Pavel shouted, jumping from his stool. – Nothing! I give you my word! And I will show the notebook to the captain myself. You'll see (Adamov 1939, 382-383).

Pavel's worldview is transformed by experiences aboard the *Pioneer*, and his perspective matures as he encounters novel situations. In this example, he learns that enemies abound and that one must be careful with secrets. In others, he discovers that courage, intelligence, loyalty, obedience, and sacrifice are qualities required to survive as a Soviet sailor. Pavel is a complex character, portrayed as an individual whose perspective and mindset constantly change.

The captain of the *Pioneer*, Viktor Vorontsov, is a wise and experienced leader. Unlike the naïve Pavel, Vorontsov is depicted as a disciplined man with a firmly grounded perspective on the world. However, while his views do not change in the same way as Pavel's, he is by no means a static character. Vorontsov is portrayed with notable psychological complexity, and his strategically masterful command in times of crisis is depicted as a result of his unique personal experience. Moreover, as an example of the new Soviet man, he is a mouthpiece for expressing Soviet ideology: he articulates the socialist worldview from an enlightened, yet evidently personal, perspective.

The characters of *Taina dvukh okeanov* are notably dissimilar to the static, one-dimensional figures of *Gibel' sensatsii*. In attempting to create a work that would attract a large audience and pass ideological muster, Adamov followed the primary stipulations of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* (e.g. setting the novel in the near future, focusing on Soviet science and technology) but did not exclusively portray the people as a collective force. Instead, he created a web of interconnected, psychologically-complex characters with individually important traits – while promoting group effort as key to the success of their mission. By making the collective action of the crew central to the novel's message, Adamov appealed to a censorship preoccupied

with ideology. On the other hand, by developing multifaceted characters whose actions have a direct impact on the unfolding events, he also created sympathetic heroes with whom readers might identify.

Adamov's *Taina dvukh okeanov* indicates a departure from a purely collectivist mentality. While the novel is overlaid with messages promoting teamwork and patriotism, there is no indication that collective forces alone are responsible for the mission's success. On the contrary, the thoughts and actions of various individuals have a recognizable effect on the development of the plot. Crewmembers of the *Pioneer* are constantly faced with tough decisions, and they rely on personal experience and techniques learned on previous missions to overcome every obstacle. They are appealing examples of the new Soviet man, and their success is framed in the context of collective effort, but they serve individually critical roles. As such, they are considerably more fleshed out than the "dull and monotonous (character) stereotypes" popular in the literature and cinema of the 1930s and 1940s (Beumers 2009, 48).

The psychological complexity of characters in Adamov's novel may be considered an appeal to the Soviet public. After almost a decade of dismal production in the realm of *fantastika*, the bureaucracy was desperate for works that could both extol Soviet science and broadly appeal to the population (McGuire 1987, 426). Adamov, a member of the Bolshevik party since the time of the Russian Revolution and an accomplished writer (Karatsupa 2003), took advantage of his position to push the boundaries of the acceptable in order to reverse the stagnation caused by oppressive censorship. He imbued *Taina dvukh okeanov* with an emphasis on the importance of individual action (albeit, within a collectivist framework), correctly

anticipating that it would be embraced by the people. Thus, even though it went contrary to the party line at a time when political ignorance could be grounds for imprisonment or execution, Adamov offered a model of Soviet identity with a revised perspective on the collectivist/individualist paradigm. This indicates that some of the propaganda proffered by the bureaucracy in the early to mid-1930s was starting to be challenged in the sociocultural sphere by the end of the decade. The Soviet people, having lived through purges, famine, and forced collectivization, were eager to experience art that did not eschew the individual. The psychology of national heroes, which had been discounted in the *fantastika* of the mid-1930s, experienced a rebirth in popularity in the late 1930s and 1940s (more on this later).

*Taina dvukh okeanov* fulfilled the wishes of the Soviet government and was faithful to the primary stipulations of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*. However, the qualities that made it into an enduring classic are minor departures from those same guidelines. In contrast to the majority of socialist realist art, which is often regarded in the West as hapless propaganda from a bygone era, *Taina dvukh okeanov* is an outstanding work of literature that was able to meet the expectations of both the bureaucracy and the Soviet public. As such, it should be considered a unique example of *fantastika* literature created in an environment of extreme conservatism – in the period immediately following Stalin’s Great Purge.

### Konstantin Pipinashvili's *Taina dvukh okeanov*

The two-part film *Taina dvukh okeanov* premiered on the cusp of the most significant period of liberalization in Soviet history. Joseph Stalin, the de facto autocrat who had ruled for over twenty-five years, passed away in 1953 and left the country with no clear successor. In the ensuing power struggle, the comparatively more liberal Nikita Khrushchev was the ultimate victor. However, unlike Stalin, who had defined himself as a successor to Lenin in both ideology and action, Khrushchev sought to distance himself from the policies of his predecessor. In 1956, he gave a now famous speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union entitled “O kul'te lichnosti i ego posledstviakh” (“On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences”). In this speech, which was not officially published until 1959, he condemned the purges and dangerous cult of personality fostered by Stalin and asserted that the former leader had strayed from the path laid out by Lenin (Khrushchev 1959). In the following years he gradually implemented a series of policies (which would later come to be known as “de-Stalinization”) that would have a profoundly invigorating effect on Soviet art and society. In contrast to the bitter power struggle following Lenin's death, which resulted in a lasting movement toward political and sociocultural conservatism, Khrushchev's ascension led to a widespread liberalization in Soviet culture.

Konstantin Pipinashvili's *Taina dvukh okeanov* was filmed in 1955 and premiered in 1956 (Fedorov 2015, 326). Produced in the period between Stalin's death and Khrushchev's speech, it is an illustrative example of Soviet *fantastika* on the verge of a major political and sociocultural transformation. From one perspective, it is perhaps the most iconic example of

*fantastika blizhnego pritsela* cinema ever created in the Soviet Union. From another, it is a stunning early example of the (comparatively more liberal) type of *fantastika* that would come to dominate in the following decades. In order to illustrate this point, allow me to begin with an analysis of an early screenplay for Pipinashvili's *Taina dvukh okeanov*, written by Nikolai Rozhkov in 1946 – over a decade before the film's premiere (Rozhkov 1946).

Rozhkov's screenplay is set in 1946, after allied victory in World War II. Like Adamov's novel, it follows the crew of the *Pioneer* as they travel around the globe battling both foreign military forces and onboard saboteurs. However, rather than imperialist spies from the Empire of Japan, the main antagonists in Rozhkov's adaptation are a group of Nazis who have created an island fortress capable of launching missiles and submarines against former members of the allied forces. A set of triplets with the surname "Krok," and the wife of the eldest brother, Madame Bekker, act to cause geopolitical chaos and undermine the mission of the *Pioneer* in order to exact revenge on the world for the defeat of Hitler's *Wehrmacht*.

Given this description, it is relatively clear that Rozhkov purposefully adapted Adamov's text to the post-WWII environment. In 1946, however, the final draft of Rozhkov's proposed adaptation was rejected outright by the censors.

The Board of Screenplays of the Arts Council considers that the screenplay for *Taina dvukh okeanov* presented for discussion, in our opinion, is of no value judging by its ideological meaning and artistic quality. The primary flaw of the screenplay is that it improperly orients the future film viewer toward international circumstances and does not adequately focus his attention on the grave danger that fascism bears for both our country and the rest of the world. . . . The commission considers this state of affairs to be unacceptable in future practice and, going forward, will not review screenplays with these types of incomplete conclusions (Pyr'ev 1946, 1).

In the official evaluation of the Ministry of Cinema,<sup>21</sup> the primary reason for the script's rejection is an inadequate response to the threat of fascism. This is surprising, especially given the obvious anti-fascist bent of Rozhkov's adaptation. After all, Adamov's novel – the basis for the screenplay – has absolutely nothing to do with fascism (the word is not even mentioned). Moreover, the enemies of the *Pioneer* in Rozhkov's adaptation are clearly identified as German fascists – the narrative is designed to put this ideology squarely in the crosshairs of its criticism. Thus, while the official explanation for rejecting the script was its insufficient focus on the dangers of fascism, the underlying reasons for this negative assessment are not immediately evident.

A crucial difference between Adamov's novel and Rozhkov's screenplay is the addition of a crucial female character in the latter. Although she is an antagonist to the *Pioneer*, Madame Bekker is granted agency and psychological complexity on par with her protagonist counterparts. She cunningly deceives investigators sent to her hotel, lies in the face of accusations of treachery, and ultimately breaks down emotionally when presented with incontrovertible evidence of her guilt. Like Protazanov's Aelita, Bekker is a powerful force whose actions play a critical role in the narrative. Considering the total absence of dynamic female characters in both *Gibel's sensatsii* and Adamov's *Taina dvukh okeanov*, one might say that the inclusion of Madam Bekker reflects a reconsideration of female agency in Soviet society in the aftermath of World War II. On the other hand, the rejection of Rozhkov's work as ideologically unsound might also

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<sup>21</sup> Ministerstvo Kinematografii SSSR, founded in 1946.



indicate that Madame Bekker was considered too fully developed (in a positive sense) as an individual character; she was not evil enough to represent the overwhelming threat of fascism.

Although it was rejected by the censors in 1946, Rozhkov's screenplay served as a central source of inspiration for Pipinashvili's 1956 film adaptation (for which Rozhkov himself was a credited screenwriter). These works share the same principal storyline and dominant themes, but, in contrast to the former, the latter was embraced by the Soviet leadership and celebrated as an artistic and ideological success (Fedorov 2015, 238). In the following analysis, I will attempt to provide an illustration of this phenomenon by highlighting crucial differences between Rozhkov's 1946 screenplay and Pipinashvili's adaptation. These differences, in turn, will underscore crucial changes in the Soviet mentality on the verge of a major sociocultural liberalization.

An easily recognizable innovation in Pipinashvili's adaptation is the inclusion of women sailors aboard the *Pioneer*. The original placard for the film features an artistic depiction of a scene involving the submarine's medical doctor, Olga Bystrykh (played by Antonina Maksimova). The image portrays her at a critical moment, just as she becomes trapped with an enemy spy in a flooding escape hatch. Bystrykh plays an important role in the narrative, serving as both a caretaker for the abandoned Pavel and a respected member of the *Pioneer's* crew. She is an image of the power and empathy of Soviet women as a whole, symbolizing feminine strength and representing the brave women who had either fought in the Great Patriotic War or had taken up new types of labor in its aftermath.

Pipinashvili's *Taina dvukh okeanov* is the first *fantastika* film in my examination that portrays Soviet women with agency. Rather than whitewashing or removing female roles from a successful work of *fantastika* literature, as Andrievskii had done with *Gibel' sensatsii*, the screenwriters of *Taina dvukh okeanov* added Bystrykh (and a female radio engineer) to the crew of the *Pioneer*. Moreover, instead of portraying foreign women as villains, as Protazanov had done with *Aelita* and Rozhkov had done with *Madam Bekker*, Pipinashvili's film depicts empowered Soviet women as attractive role models. The introduction of these characters to the plot indicates that the sociocultural and political circumstances that had stifled messages of female empowerment in the 1930s and 1940s had noticeably changed by the mid-1950s.

As a project broken into two full length feature films, Pipinashvili's adaptation is significantly longer than Rozhkov's screenplay was intended to be. The film is rife with detailed explanations of the *Pioneer's* technical capabilities and drawn-out scenes that depict the types of underwater landscape and fauna described in Adamov's novel. Over ten percent of the film consists of scenes made with special effects, and there are a plethora of instances in which the *Pioneer's* scientists offer explanations of the mechanisms that allow the vessel to function. These include descriptions of the diving suits, the engine mechanism, the escape hatch, the laser used to cut through ice, and more. The scientific descriptions of devices and meticulously crafted props in *Taina dvukh okeanov* serve to justify the existence of fantastic tools in a realist narrative. The intermittent scenes made with special effects, on the other hand, are aimed at attracting viewers to a fantastic world and entertaining a broad public (Fedorov 2015, 329).

The first half of the 1950s is widely considered the nadir of *fantastika* cinema. In an environment that saw the lowest annual production since before the Russian Revolution (Kenez 2001, 3), Soviet censors and filmmakers were determined to create films that would be both entertaining to the population and ideologically sound. In hopes of appealing to a broad audience, Pipinashvili devoted a significant portion of his work to the portrayal of an exotic underwater world. At the same time, he included dense descriptions of scientific subjects and theoretical inventions to appease the censors who promoted *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* as the only legitimate form of *fantastika* art. In doing so, Pipinashvili established a careful balance between two powerful opposing forces and created a work of socialist realism that appealed to both the bureaucracy and the general population.

Considering the criticism leveled at Rozhkov's adaptation, it is perhaps surprising that the antagonists of Pipinashvili's film are not identified as fascists. The ideological motivations of Gorelov, the principal antagonist, are not hashed out in any recognizable way. Instead, the enemies of *Taina dvukh okeanov* are simply enemies of the Soviet Union – they are “stereotyped genre figures” (Fedorov 2015, 331) – neither capitalist, imperialist, nor fascist. This would seem to indicate a change in the foundations of Soviet censorship: a reconsideration of the necessity for labeling the enemy in terms of political ideology. As I will show in my analysis of post-Stalinist *fantastika* (Chapter 2), this may be considered an early sign of the apolitical, panhumanistic direction that Soviet cinema took in the aftermath of Stalin's death.

The final point that I will make concerning Pipinashvili's *Taina dvukh okeanov* is that it manages to portray a healthy balance between collectivist and individualist ideologies. There is a

clear implication that the mission's success is dependent on both collective enterprise and individual heroism. Outside perspectives of the ship (made with special effects) portray the crew as a single entity in interwoven scenes, and images of them standing in uniform atop the ship identify them as members of a proud national service. However, the crew of the *Pioneer* also features psychologically complex characters with individual talents and strengths. Gorelov, Pavel, Bystrykh and others play individually important roles that have a noticeable impact on the development of the plot. In the transition between the conservatism of Stalin's rule and a cultural liberalization following Khrushchev's speech, a synthesis of these two opposing ideologies woven into the film created a product that could appeal to both the bureaucracy and the Soviet public. In the struggle between collectivism and individualism that has been characteristic of Russian identity since at least the early 1800s, this balance may be viewed as an indication that the trend toward cultural conservatism had finally begun to reverse for the first time since the early 1930s.

## Chapter 2

### Post-Stalinist *Fantastika*:

### Cultural Liberalization during the Thaw and Stagnation Periods

In some ways, Khrushchev served his people well. By ridding the Soviet Union of Lavrenty Beria and subsequently bringing the KGB under Party control, he freed people of the ever-present fear of arbitrary arrest and incarceration in the Gulag Archipelago. He helped to restore the norms of Party life and was personally responsible for the rehabilitation of millions of Stalin's victims . . . The Khrushchev years saw a beginning of foreign tourism, improved availability of housing and consumer goods, a relaxation in the arts and the doctrine of "peaceful coexistence" (Carter 1990, 55).

This chapter will examine transformations in Russian national identity and the Soviet worldview during the Thaw (*ottepel'*) and Stagnation Period (*period zastoia*) as they are reflected in four *fantastika* film adaptations. Let me begin by acknowledging that there is little consensus concerning the start and end dates of either period.<sup>22</sup> The periodization that I have proposed – the Thaw (1957-1967), the Stagnation (1968-1985) – is not an attempt to (re)define these segments of Soviet cultural history. Instead, it is based on an analysis of four highly-acclaimed *fantastika* film adaptations and their associated literary texts. Through an examination of *Chelovek-amfibiia* (1962), *Tumannost' andromedy* (1967), *Solaris* (1971), and *Stalker* (1979), I will provide a justification for my proposed periodization and illustrate how these works reflect key features of the Russian worldview as it evolved from 1957 to 1985.

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<sup>22</sup> Birgit Beumers notes: "As complex as it is to define the beginning of the period called the Thaw – by choosing between Stalin's death, Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1956, and the publication of Ilya Erenburg's novel *The Thaw* (*Ottepel'*) in 1954 as markers – it becomes almost impossible to find consensus on the date that would 'close' the period: Khrushchev's deposition on 14 October 1964, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, or the arrest and trial of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel for the publication of 'anti-Soviet' works...in 1966" (Beumers 2009, 112).

## **Soviet Identity during the Thaw: Humanism over Politics in *Chelovek-amfibiia* and *Tumannost'* *andromedy***

The Thaw revived the Soviet film industry: comedies could be made once again, and films could turn the hero back into an individual human being, placing humanist values before ideological concerns. The films of this period concerned the simple man and ordinary lives rather than leaders, heroes, and shock-workers (Beumers 2009, 112).

The Thaw was a period of broad cultural liberalization in Soviet society. As one of the greatest cultural blossomings in Russian history, this period witnessed a significant reconsideration of the roots of Soviet identity. Following the death of Joseph Stalin and the initiation of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign, a major relaxation of state oversight (and terror) created an environment in which writers and directors were considerably emboldened (Shatz 1980, 115). Between 1956 and 1967, many succeeded in releasing works that were either apolitical or openly critical of Soviet (read: Stalinist) ideology and practice without significant consequences (Beumers 2009, 113). Examining works from the third period of *fantastika* film adaptation, this section will discuss a shift in the Russian perception of national identity away from political discourse. The films to be explored here, *Chelovek-amfibiia* and *Tumannost' andromedy*, will be investigated for signs of emerging worldviews in Soviet society during the Thaw: a period that witnessed the demise of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* and the birth of apolitical *fantastika* fiction. The impact of a loosening of censorship restrictions, the actions of writers and directors who sought to push the boundaries of the acceptable, and the humanistic

subjects and themes characteristic of these works will serve as the foundation for an examination of the Soviet worldview in the period from 1957 to 1967.

Premiering in 1962, *Chelovek-amfibiia* was the first *fantastika* film adaptation to feature a meaningful departure from the prescriptions of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*. The film's ideological drive is overshadowed by a narrative focused on individual values and ethical dilemmas; the plot involves a tragic love story, a fight against an immoral antagonist, and a father who sacrifices himself to save his son. Instead of focusing on the evils of capitalist (or fascist) ideology, *Chelovek-amfibiia* shows an inclination to entertain, rather than to educate the masses in Soviet dogma. Indicating a major departure from the prescribed requirements of socialist realism under Stalin, this film may be viewed as an attempt to elevate individualism over collectivist ideology in Soviet art.

Premiering in 1967, *Tumannost' andromedy* was the first successful *fantastika* film adaptation produced after the infamous Siniavskii-Daniel Trial overseen by Leonid Brezhnev. This adaptation of Ivan Efremov's 1957 novel of the same name portrays a society perfected by communism, but downplays this facet of the plot in order to devote greater attention to individual and interpersonal themes. Although it premiered at a time of increased censorship under Brezhnev's leadership, it bears recognizable indications that the liberal trend which began during the Thaw continued to have a profound impact on Soviet sociocultural production well beyond Khrushchev's ouster. Thus, while the impact of discovering life on a deserted planet and the dangers of exploring the unknown provide an alluring fantastic frame, a love triangle between the main characters is granted the highest priority in *Tumannost' andromedy*. Moreover, despite

the fact that the film premiered on the cusp of a crucial transition between the Thaw and Stagnation period, its plot (like that of *Chelovek-amfibiia*) is significantly more concerned with sociocultural themes than political ideology. As such, it will be examined as a mature representation of Thaw-era *fantastika* and a precursor to that of the latter period, which witnessed a clampdown on cultural production and apolitical themes (Beumers 2009, 149).

In this section, I will show how *Chelovek-amfibiia* and *Tumannost' andromedy* laid the groundwork for films made in the following decades – allowing directors to place greater emphasis on personal, social, and philosophical issues by relegating political discourse to a secondary position. As a reflection of Russian national identity, these films indicate a notable movement away from the conservative collectivist ideology that dominated the Stalin era and toward more liberal and humanist cultural and ethical values in Soviet society.



### Aleksandr Beliaev's *Chelovek-amfibiia*

It is generally accepted that Aleksandr Romanovich Beliaev was one of the founders of Soviet science fiction. According to many researchers, he is the original source of the Russian school of science fiction (Revich 1997, 125).

Aleksandr Beliaev was the most widely published and critically popular *fantastika* author of the first half of the twentieth century in the Soviet Union (Liapunov 1967, 9). One of the few writers who was consistently permitted to publish science fiction during the Stalin era, Beliaev's oeuvre has a special place in the history of Russian *fantastika*.<sup>23</sup> However, although most of his major works have been published in English, there is a dearth of critical analysis concerning his texts in the West. Unfortunately, because *Chelovek-amfibiia* was written during the first period of *fantastika* film adaptation (which was the focus of the previous chapter), my discussion of Beliaev's novel will be brief. Instead, I will attempt to provide an analysis of the author's impact on the Soviet sociocultural mentality through an analysis of its Thaw-era adaptation.

Before analyzing the film, I believe it pertinent to point out a few features of Beliaev's *Chelovek-amfibiia* that set it apart from the mainstream *fantastika* fiction of the Stalin era. In doing so, I will illustrate a connection between the artistic production of the 1920s and that of the Thaw. I will attempt to demonstrate that, while the *fantastika* of the Stalin era may be viewed as unique in the history of the Soviet Union, there is a readily recognizable link between the fantastic literature and cinema of the 1920s and that of the post-Stalinist period.

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<sup>23</sup> According to Patrick McGuire: "At first unnoticed, Stalin's power grew throughout the 1920s, and by the end of the decade Stalinism brought disaster to Soviet SF... The one major SF writer of the decade who did continue publication was Beliaev. He survived as a writer thanks to the support of the scientific community and considerable agility regarding subject matter" (McGuire 1987, 426).

Beliaev's *Chelovek-amfibiia* was serialized in both the Moscow and St. Petersburg editions of the journal *Vokrug sveta* in 1928 and published as a whole by *Zemlia i fabrika* in the same year. Perhaps most tellingly in juxtaposition to Stalinist socialist realism, the plot of Beliaev's novel is inherently individualistic: collective action does not play a discernable role. Like Vladimir Vladko's *Idut roboty*, *Chelovek-amfibiia* features psychologically complex characters, important individual actors, and intimate personal relationships. Doctor Salvator, an Argentinian scientist, develops a means to surgically splice animal parts into human bodies. He is a reclusive genius, but serves as a savior to the surrounding community by preserving the lives of the infirm with his medical experiments. As a stand-in for the new Soviet man (described in Chapter 1), he acts bravely and heroically to save the lives of his subjects even in the face of great personal danger. However, his unsociable nature and tendency toward a hermetic lifestyle is a notable departure from the collectivist thematics that shaped the artistic production of the Stalin era. Ikhtiandr, the novel's protagonist, is depicted as a romantic young man: readers are given access to his personal thoughts and dreams as well as his motivations and fears. The narrative surrounding Ikhtiandr's adventures is distinctly personal, representing a divergence from the precepts of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* that sought to promote collective action as superior to individual heroism. Finally, the secondary characters of the novel, including Guttiere, Ikhtiandr's love interest, and Bal'tazar, her alcoholic father, are portrayed with notable psychological complexity – a feature that distinguishes them from the type-cast characters characteristic of socialist realism in the 1930s and 1940s (Beumers 2009, 48).

A juxtaposition of *Chelovek-amfibiia* and Grigorii Adamov's *Taina dvukh okeanov* may elucidate another significant difference between the *fantastika* of the late 1920s and that of the Stalin era. While in *Taina dvukh okeanov* the antagonists are motivated by political aims (i.e. to expand the Empire of Japan and undermine socialism), in Beliaev's novel the primary antagonist is a single corrupt businessman. Rather than a battle against capitalism or imperialism as an ideology, *Chelovek-amfibiia* personalizes the enemy and does not exclusively focus on his political motivations. While Zurita's association with capitalism may designate him as the primary antagonist, his affiliation with this "enemy" ideology is a secondary aspect of a distinctively villainous personality. That is, Zurita's portrayal as a selfish and immoral individual is not dependent on his identification with capitalism; in contrast to the imperialist spies in Adamov's novel (or, for that matter, the fascist sympathizers in Pipinashvili's adaptation), the characters of *Chelovek-amfibiia* are not defined by their ideological beliefs. This distinction, which may appear trivial in a comparison of the literature of the 1920s and that of the Stalin era, came to play a major role in the sociocultural production of the Thaw.

The final distinction that I will address may be viewed in the context of socialist realism as a mode and *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* as a (sub)genre. Like Vladimir Vladko's *Idut roboty*, *Chelovek-amfibiia* depicts a struggle between wealthy oppressors and proletarian heroes in a distant capitalist country. However, in contrast to Andrei Andrievskii's *Gibel' sensatsii*, which portrays this struggle through the frame of Marxist historical materialism, Beliaev's work involves a conflict between individuals in a society that appears disinterested in political dogma. It is a love story: there is no hint of proletarian revolution, no struggle against capitalism as a

system, and no inference that socialist ideology might abet the heroes in their efforts to obtain justice. The fact that the events of the novel are organized around a love triangle (and not a revolution) indicates that it is primarily concerned with personal and “domestic” issues, rather than political ideology.

Aleksandr Beliaev was well respected by the Soviet leadership in a period that witnessed a major decrease in artistic production. Although he was sometimes castigated in the 1930s for failing to fulfill the objectives of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*, the censors continued to allow the publication of his works with little interference (Glad 1982, 150). An example of Beliaev’s ability to push the limits of censorship – even in the harshly conservative environment following the Great Purges – is the publication of his final novel, *Ariel*, in 1941. This work features a young English orphan who gains the ability to fly, an occultist institution that teaches students to use superhuman abilities, and an intimate psychological portrait of the hero. Like *Chelovek-amfibiia*, *Ariel* is focused on the adventures of a single individual: readers are privy to his thoughts, emotions, and motivations. Ariel’s interactions with the outside world are phantasmagorical: he learns to fly, witnesses magical acts, and experiences spiritual enlightenment through both eastern religion and Christianity. He bears a striking resemblance to *Chelovek-amfibiia*’s Ikhtiandr (Liapunov 1967, 117), and his experiences are similarly fantastic and ultimately tragic. Moreover, while capitalism plays a more significant role in Beliaev’s later novel, there is no hint of revolutionary action and very little in terms of political thematics.<sup>24</sup> By creating a character whose most meaningful experiences are with science, magic, and religion,

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, there are no Soviet (or Russian) characters in either *Chelovek-amfibiia* or *Ariel*.

the author unseated socialist ideology from its preeminent position. In the same vein as *Chelovek-amfibiia*, Beliaev's *Ariel*' is predominantly apolitical, with a narrative focused on individual development, personal struggle, and the relationship between man, morality, and the universe.

It is important to our understanding of Beliaev's relationship with the Stalinist bureaucracy to recognize that, in addition to the rather unscientific and apolitical novels mentioned above, he also produced works that were significantly more in line with the prescriptions of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela*. The inventions that Beliaev describes in his *Slepoi polet*, *Nebesnyi gost*', and *Vozdushnyi korabl*', for instance, are meticulously recreated from astrophysicist Konstantin Tsiolkovskii's notes (Beliaev 1998, 249). As in Tolstoi's *Aelita*, Vladko's *Idut roboty*, and Adamov's *Taina dvukh okeanov*, these sophisticated technical specifications are employed to add greater realism to the narrative. Other writings, including *Zemlia gorit* and *Pryzhok v nichto*, are preoccupied with issues concerning the future development of communist ideology and portray human progress through the frame of Marxist historical materialism (Liapunov 1967, 28). However, although other connections might be made between Beliaev's oeuvre and the prevailing trends of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* during the Stalin era, it is clear that the author did not limit himself to writing about the near future, collective victory, revolution, Soviet science, or socialist ideology. Nevertheless, he was embraced by the bureaucracy in a period that witnessed a brutal clampdown on cultural production in general, and *fantastika* fiction in particular.

Aleksandr Beliaev's reputation allowed him to publish works that featured considerable departures from the dominant and strictly enforced trends of Stalin-era *fantastika*. Although he died during the Siege of Leningrad in 1941, both *Chelovek-amfibiia* and *Ariel* continued to enjoy considerable popularity and were republished in various editions throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. This is the avenue by which *Chelovek-amfibiia*, first released in the period preceding Stalin's conservative rule, became the inspiration for a film adaptation at the height of the Thaw.

In the context of a society-wide liberalization under Nikita Khrushchev, the decision to adapt (and popular success of) a predominantly apolitical text is an indication that the Soviet worldview was shifting away from ideological concerns and looking back to the years before Stalin's rule for artistic inspiration. Finally experiencing a degree of freedom from terror and a conservative censorship apparatus that had stifled *fantastika* cinema for nearly a quarter of a century, Soviet directors began to relegate political discourse to a secondary position.

### Vladimir Chebotarev and Genadii Kazanskii's *Chelovek-Amfibiia*

*Chelovek-amfibiia*, directed by Gennadii Kazanskii and Vladimir Chebotarev, was the first Soviet *fantastika* film adaptation to break away from a predominantly political message. Premiering in 1962, it was highest grossing film of the year and one of the most commercially successful works of cinema ever produced in the Soviet Union (Khrenov 2006, 529). While it received critical reviews from some party critics, it was embraced by the Soviet public and heralded a period of revival in Russian *fantastika* cinema (ibid.).

*Chelovek-amfibiia* is a tragic love story imbued with fantastic elements. The plot is centered on a romance between Ikhtiandr, a young man with a hermitic lifestyle, and Guttiere, the daughter of an Argentinian fisherman. Ikhtiandr is the homonymous “amphibian-man,” capable of breathing under water and exploring the extremes of the Atlantic Ocean with a set of gills grafted into his body by the ingenious Dr. Salvator. Don Pedro Zurita, a wealthy fisherman, serves as a foil to Ikhtiandr and the primary antagonist. The interactions between these characters represent the narrative’s principal conflict.

*Chelovek-amfibiia* is set in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The film opens with a view of the magnificent coastline, followed by a bulletin-style voice narration describing the rumored “Sea Devil.”

The events that will be described in this film began with the appearance of a mysterious and strange creature on the shore of the craggy cape. It looked like a person with fish scales and huge, toad-like eyes. The fishermen have nicknamed it the “Sea Devil.” One day the Sea Devil’s tracks were found on the harbor beach. Residents claimed that at night it rode on the back of a dolphin and blew boisterously on a horn. The newspapers reported that it had sunk the fishing boat *Luchia*, dragged two young nuns

into the ocean, and devoured a diving pearl collector (Chebotarev and Kazanskii 1961).

On a pearling ship we are introduced to Don Pedro Zurita, a wealthy businessman, Bal'tazar, an elderly fisherman, and Guttierre, the film's heroine. Zurita declares his interest in marrying Guttierre, but she jumps from the ship to avoid his advances. As she swims away, a shark appears and attacks. The Sea Devil, Ikhtiandr, kills the shark and rescues her, placing her unconscious body into Zurita's skiff as the businessman watches in amazement. Following a lengthy series of scenes depicting Ikhtiandr in his exotic underwater world, it is revealed that Zurita has taken credit for saving Guttierre and plans to hunt the Sea Devil for profit.

Ikhtiandr swims into an underground cave that leads to a laboratory built into the side of a cliff. Here we are introduced to Doctor Salvator, a skilled surgeon, and Olsen, a journalist and friend of the doctor. At this point, an important conversation takes place that may help to illustrate my arguments concerning the role of political ideology in Thaw-era cinema. Because it is the only dialogue pertaining to politics in the film, and because it provides evidence for claims that I will make later in my analysis, I have chosen to present it below:

Olsen: Recently the procurator read my article and our newspaper was fined. We have no money because we are the poor man's paper. Would you consider lending us ten thousand? Otherwise, the newspaper will be closed.

Salvator: For you personally, as much as you want. But I won't give anything to the newspaper.

Olsen: Thanks, but I don't need anything.

Salvator: You know my principle. I don't get involved in politics.

Olsen: So, we should let everything stay as it is?

Salvator: No! The unfortunate need help. But it will be a scientist that helps them, not a politician or journalist.

Olsen: Really?

Salvator: Really.



Olsen: Do you mean yourself?

Salvator: Exactly. I will lead the poor into a fertile land where no one can oppress them.

Olsen: Where then? To heaven? To the moon?

Salvator: No . . . into the ocean. At the bottom of the ocean there are neither poor nor rich. There everyone will live freely and happily.

Olsen: So, this will be a republic of the drowned?

Salvator: Don't joke, Olsen. I am letting you in on a great secret. Imagine an ocean inhabited by people who breathe water like fish.

Olsen: Dear friend, that sounds like a fairy tale.

Salvator: No, it is not a fairy tale. Follow me.

(Ikhtiandr appears, startling Olsen)

Salvator: This is my son Ikhtiandr. The first citizen of the underwater republic. Get changed and come back here.

Ikhtiandr: Yes, father.

Salvator: When he was a child, I discovered that he had an incurable lung disease. In order to save the boy, I transplanted the gills of a young shark into him. This very risky operation was a success. It was then that the idea for the creation of an underwater republic came to me.

Olsen: Salvator, I am humbled before your ingenious hands. But your idea of an underwater republic – it's a utopia. In this underwater kingdom both the poor and the rich will rise again.

Salvator: I already read about that in your newspaper.

Olsen: Okay, fine. Suppose you implant gills into anyone that wants them. But people are people, they will miss the land.

Salvator: The conversation has come to an end, dear Olsen.

(Chebotarev and Kazanskii 1961)

Doctor Salvator describes his vision of an underwater utopia and reveals a fantastic scientific achievement: the amphibian-man. Ikhtiandr appears as a handsome young individual and Olsen, a journalist for a working-class newspaper, is left in wonder at Salvator's scientific achievement. However, he is quick to point out the naïveté of the doctor's utopian dream for a classless "underwater republic." Later in my analysis, I will argue that Olsen's response indicates a cynical perspective on utopian idealism that represents a distinct departure from the conventions of Stalin-era cinema.

Following his encounter with Guttiere, Ikhtiandr sneaks into Buenos Aires in attempt to find her. He is bewildered by the city's commotion, but ultimately finds Olsen and Guttiere conversing near her father's shop. Ikhtiandr, naïve and passionate, approaches Guttiere and openly declares his love to her. Meanwhile, Zurita appears and attempts to intimidate the hero. Ikhtiandr challenges and ultimately overpowers Zurita, but finds himself in a police chase following the altercation.

After discovering that Ikhtiandr and Guttiere are meeting in secret, Zurita kidnaps and imprisons her on his family estate. Hoping to legitimize the crime, he pays a dowry to Bal'tazar – Guttiere's father. Bal'tazar recognizes that his daughter has been imprisoned and goes to Zurita's home to beg for her release, but he is rejected and told never to return. At night, Ikhtiandr appears to rescue Guttiere. Tragically, Zurita's mother warns him of the intruder and Ikhtiandr is captured. The amphibian-man is forced to work as a pearl diver aboard Zurita's ship, until Olsen and Doctor Salvator come to his rescue with an armed personal submarine. Shortly after his rescue, however, Doctor Salvator and Olsen are arrested and Ikhtiandr is captured in a net by the Argentinian police.

Returning to Zurita's compound, Bal'tazar berates him and demands the release of Guttiere. After being refused, Bal'tazar murders Zurita and promptly phones the police to confess his crime. Guttiere is released and Olsen and Dr. Salvator develop a plan to free Ikhtiandr. A police guard, whose relative was saved by one of Salvator's procedures, offers to help the doctor escape. Instead, Salvator decides to remain in prison so that Ikhtiandr may be saved. However, in a tragic twist, it is revealed that Ikhtiandr can no longer survive on land

because of physical distress caused by his time in prison. He must return to live in the ocean, and Guttiere and Olsen must travel to Australia to evade the police. After securing Ikhtiandr's release, Olsen and Guttiere bring him to the sea and speak their parting words. Ikhtiandr swims into the rolling waves and the credits begin to roll.

The narrative of *Chelovek-amfibiia* is tragic and full of pathos. Bal'tazar sacrifices himself for Guttiere by murdering her oppressor, knowing that he will suffer shame and punishment for the crime. Dr. Salvator, when given the opportunity to spare himself, chooses to save Ikhtiandr instead. The relationship between Ikhtiandr and Guttiere is attractive, yet it represents a "forbidden love" *à la Romeo and Juliet*. These elements elicit empathy and help to create an emotional connection between viewers and the characters. Chebotarev and Kazanskii's adaptation is true to the thematics of Beliaev's classic: personal, social, and ethical issues are granted the highest priority in the narrative.

The dialogue between Olsen and Doctor Salvator quoted above presents information that is vital to our understanding of the culture in which the film was produced. Olsen responds cynically to Doctor Salvator's proposed underwater republic, claiming that "in this underwater kingdom both the poor and the rich will rise again." His skeptical response indicates that he is an enlightened socialist with a firm understanding of human nature and a distrust of utopian idealism. As the single representative of the enlightened proletariat in the film, Olsen is an image of the new Soviet man in his second speciation. Still selflessly acting to fight for justice, this (let's call him "post-Stalinist") new Soviet man believes that human nature must be addressed before significant progress can be made through material or scientific means. His final response

serves to imprint this message in the mind of the viewer: “Okay, fine. Suppose you implant gills into anyone who wants them. But people are people, they will miss the land” (Chebotarev and Kazanskii 1961). Olsen recognizes that human nature is not readily tractable, and that human evolution depends on individual and social development in addition to technological progress. In juxtaposition with the utopian propaganda that accompanied Stalin’s grandiose (and objectively infeasible) Five Year Plans, Olsen’s response indicates a considerably more practical approach to social evolution. Moreover, in contrast to the collectivist and pseudo-utopian messages characteristic of *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* in the 1930s and 1940s, *Chelovek-amfibiia* expresses a significantly more rational and humanistic perspective on the contemporary Soviet worldview.<sup>25</sup>

As a reflection of Soviet national identity at the height of the Thaw, *Chelovek-amfibiia* exhibits a humanistic, apolitical approach to its subject matter. In conjunction with Khrushchev’s economic policies, which prioritized consumerism over heavy industry (Reid 2002, 221), the Soviet worldview experienced a shift away from political discourse toward more personal, social, and domestic issues. Olsen’s aporetic response betrays a fresh perspective on the world – one that is disillusioned with utopian idealism and informed by a more sober approach to human progress. No longer solely focused on the rapid development of a perfect communist future, *Chelovek-amfibiia* promotes an ideology founded on individual and social ethics.

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<sup>25</sup> I am not suggesting that all of Stalinist propaganda was utopian – much of it was not. Nor am I ignoring anti-utopian literature and cinema from the Stalin era – as there was a notable amount. Instead, I am trying to highlight the divide between Soviet propaganda and the perceived reality of average citizens during the Thaw.

Excluding the conversation between Olsen and Doctor Salvator quoted above, *Chelovek-amfibiia* contains little in terms of political discourse. Unlike in *Idut roboty* or *Taina dvukh okeanov*, there are no explicit references to the Soviet Union in Chebotarev and Kazanskii's adaptation. While the antagonist is portrayed as a greedy and violent individual, it is clear that he is a petty tyrant: Zurita is simply a corrupt businessman, not an imperialist spy (as in *Taina dvukh okeanov*) or member of a shadowy military conspiracy (as in *Idut roboty*). This is an indication of another significant transformation in the Soviet worldview that took place during the Thaw: the formerly conservative, xenophobic isolationism that was characteristic of the Stalin era began to make way for a limited internationalism and greater openness toward foreign culture. In the transition from the Stalinist ideology of "Socialism in one country" to Khrushchev's "Peaceful Coexistence," the relationship between "us" and "them" was reevaluated. Viewed through the frame of Berdiaev and Chaadaev's theories on Russian national identity, this is perhaps the fullest manifestation since the 1920s of a mitigated xenophobia and reexamination of the Soviet Union's place in the global landscape.

*Chelovek-amfibiia* is not an entirely bereft of political thematics. Zurita's harsh treatment of his pearl diving crew, for instance, may be interpreted as a reflection of the capitalistic exploitation of the working class. The villain's kidnapping of Guttiere, which he justifies with a dowry to her father, may also be considered a commentary on an unjust sociopolitical system. However, while political ideology certainly plays some role in the narrative, it is secondary to the humanistic message around which the film is centered. That is, while there is an underlying

ideological premise developed throughout the film, it is subordinate to and overshadowed by a non-political message.

The worldview promoted in *Chelovek-amfibiia* is a reflection of the trend toward apolitical art characteristic of the Thaw. One aspect of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization, evident in Chebotarev and Kazanskii's adaptation, was a decrease in *prescribed* censorship. Under Khrushchev's leadership, artists began to approach a growing number of subjects and themes that had been categorically forbidden in the previous period. As the film industry was progressively liberalized, however, the censorship apparatus became significantly more *proscriptive*. Instead of banning "ideologically-flawed" screenplays outright (like Nikolai Rozhkov's *Taina dvukh okeanov*), Thaw-era censors were ordered to work with screenwriters and directors to make revisions and create marketable products. While this led to a dramatic increase in film production overall, it also led to the creation of works that were significantly less ideologically controlled (Faraday 2000, 122). Thus, instead of a fight against the enemies of socialism, *Chelovek-amfibiia* is a love story with fantastic elements. Rather than the collective triumph over Western ideologies that served as the driving force behind Andrievskii's *Gibel' sensatsii* and Adamov's *Taina dvukh okeanov*, individual psychology and interpersonal relationships are at the center of Chebotarev and Kazanskii's adaptation. This indicates the humanist direction in which the film industry began to move after Khrushchev's Secret Speech, as well as a dominant trend in the perception of Soviet identity in the aftermath Stalin's death. This perspective, which expanded and changed during the Stagnation period (1964-1985), will be analyzed in greater detail in the following section.

### Ivan Efremov's *Tumannost' andromedy*

Andromeda's far-future setting and its many idiosyncratic philosophical views were not widely imitated, but the novel did serve as a signal that the limits of the genre had broadened dramatically. . . . Between *Andromeda's* magazine appearance and its book publication came Sputnik . . . speculation previously scorned as unworldly and impractical now seemed triumphantly justified. . . . Certainly the near-target school [*fantastika blizhnego pritsela*] was pushed into the background, ignored by critics, scholars, and even most readers (McGuire 1987, 432-433).

As both a scientist and fantasist, Ivan Efremov's contribution to Soviet *fantastika* was equal parts practical and theoretical (Glad 1982, 155). He is the founder of the paleontological field known as taphonomy, for which he received the Stalin Prize in 1952, as well as a highly-acclaimed author and theorist of science fiction (ibid.). His second and most successful novel, *Tumannost' andromedy*, first serialized in the magazine *Tekhnika-molodezhi* in 1957, represents a critical breakthrough in Soviet *fantastika* fiction (McGuire 1985, 18). For this reason, I have chosen to associate the start of the third period of Russian *fantastika* film adaptation with Efremov's foundational text. In the following paragraphs, I will justify my periodization with an analysis of *Tumannost' andromedy* and its impact on the evolution of the Soviet worldview during the Thaw.

In his book *Ivan Efremov's Theory of Soviet Science Fiction*, literary scholar George Grebens indicates a significant contrast between Efremov's novel and the conventions of the preceding period:

During the late thirties, forties, and the early fifties, science fiction used the existing or immediate attainable gadgetry of applied science for its scientific and technological

content. This pragmatic approach never really enabled science fiction to develop its wings – its phantastic potentials. Literary works of this type were largely oriented towards economic production, with great emphasis on the immediate present. It is not surprising that this approach inevitably led to the development of the schematized adventure hero. The main character of such fiction was the traditional scientist, inventor, professor, engineer, technician, worker, or detective, with such supporting characters as sailors and pilots. These characters had very little psychological substantiality. They merely performed basic functions in an oversimplified plot. When the writer did try to make his characters more alive by allowing them to display individual weaknesses, the result was generally far from plausible. This became increasingly obvious when one considered the nature of the scientific experiment undertaken by the hero. Soviet SF fit perfectly in the overall pattern that Soviet mainstream literature was developing during these years. Production, industrialization, collectivization, depiction of the image of the new Soviet Man, Soviet struggle against ideological enemies—all these were the standard for most of Soviet literature beginning in the thirties. . . . By the second half of the fifties, the change in Soviet SF became significant (Grebens 1978, 2).

Speaking of Efremov's influence on Soviet *fantastika* during the Thaw, Boris Strugatskii

declared in an *OFF-LINE* interview<sup>26</sup> in 2006:

Efremov was an icebreaker of a man. He broke through the seemingly unbreakable ice of the "short aim theory" [*fantastika blizhnego pritsela*]. He has shown how one can and should write modern science fiction, and thus has ushered in a new era of Soviet SF. Of course, this was already a new era – the Stalinist Ice Age was nearing its end. I think that, even without *Andromeda*, Soviet SF would have gone in a new direction. But the publication of *Andromeda* has become a symbol of the new era – its banner in a sense. Without it, the new growth would have been an order of magnitude more difficult, and a thaw in our SF would not have come until later (Strugatskii 2006).

Boris Strugatskii viewed *Tumannost' andromedy* as a major step forward in Soviet *fantastika*

fiction and, as I will discuss later, took advantage of the "new direction" that flew under the

banner of Efremov's pivotal text.

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<sup>26</sup> This is an online user-driven interview format. Questions are submitted prior to the interview or added in real time as it progresses. There is no journalist or coordinator officially in control of the interview and technically no start and end time.



One of the most interesting features of Grebens' study is his examination of fundamental innovations introduced by Efremov during the Thaw. Critically, Grebens discusses the impact of *Tumannost' andromedy* in light of its most significant feature: a future society perfected by social evolution. Because I discussed a transformation in the Soviet approach to utopian idealism in my analysis of Kazanskii and Chebotarev's *Chelovek-amfibiia*, I will begin my examination of Efremov's text with an illustration of the thematics surrounding this fictional society.

*Tumannost' andromedy* is set in the distant future, over a thousand years after the present day.<sup>27</sup> The novel follows the adventures of the crew of the spaceship *Tantra*, both during and after its voyage into the far reaches of space. In this future world, set in the "Era of the Great Ring" (*Era velikogo kol'tsa*), human society has been perfected by social progress, scientific achievement, and communication with members of an intergalactic counsel. This society is founded on the principle of panhumanism, and the sociocultural mindset of Earth's inhabitants is driven by education, research, and exploration.

In some aspects the future Earth world described in Ivan Efremov's *Andromeda Nebula* is a realization of a utopian vision of the ideal future, popular during this period in the Soviet Union. The society of this world is just a single nation that occupies the whole planet and all of its members speak the same language. The nature of the entire planet is transformed according to communist ideas of the better world which were widespread in the 1920s. . . . In other aspects Efremov's ideas about the future were new to the Soviet utopian tradition. It concerns those who live in this utopian world. In this novel Efremov for the first time focused on the humans of the future and gave their detailed description. People of the Andromeda Nebula's future represent the ideal humans. All of them are handsome, strong and intelligent. . . . All of them show a high level of morality. It is impossible for them to lie; they do not know hate or jealousy; they are always ready to help each other and so on. According to Efremov, moral

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<sup>27</sup> Dates conforming to the Gregorian calendar are absent from *Tumannost' andromedy* and Efremov has offered conflicting chronologies in his notes and in commentary on various editions. However, it is generally agreed upon that the novel is set at least a thousand years in the future.

qualities like respect of others or personal responsibility towards society would be the basis of an ideal society. In his opinion an ideal society is above all a society composed by ideal members (Chumárova 2015, 35).

In Efremov's novel, the inhabitants of Earth have evolved over the course of hundreds of years to become ideal citizens of a classless society. They form part of a greater whole – a worldwide utopia – but they are socially evolved on an individual level: their society is perfect because they are perfect. Literary historian Natalia Chumárova makes a compelling case for this interpretation in her article “Ivan Efremov's *Andromeda Nebula*: The Turning Point of Soviet Science-Fiction Literature.”

The detailed description of the society of the future and its inhabitants was a new step in the evolution of Soviet science-fiction literature. Before *Andromeda Nebula* writers focused their stories on the explanation of technical inventions and the precise description of machines, and not humans and their life. This difference is crucial for the understanding of the revolutionary role of Efremov's novel because it explains why the ideal society of *Andromeda Nebula* is situated in the far-away future. To resume the freedom to travel, to choose a profession, a place to live and a lifestyle, to give one's own opinion about social and political development of an entire society are the main characteristics of life in the ideal world of Efremov's future. In order to deserve it, every inhabitant of this world has a moral duty to work in a team within the society in order to guarantee a constant evolution of everything and everyone. As it has already been said, according to Efremov it is impossible to create a perfect society without the personal perfection of each of its members. And his main argument of the impossibility of a quick construction of perfect society is the impossibility for people to change their moral qualities that fast. Thus, in order to become better, perfect human beings who can live in and develop an ideal society, humanity would have to go through an important trial that takes thousands of years (Chumárova 2015, 37).

In Efremov's utopian vision, the perfection of the individual's moral, ethical, and physical character is a fundamental part of social evolution. In this future society, humans live significantly longer lives that are fulfilled through freedom of labor. Every individual has

virtually unlimited agency and liberty to follow any productive pursuit. Moreover, from a political perspective, Efremov's utopia appears to be an advanced form of absolute democracy.

A central political power is absent; society is managed by all its members. Political decisions are discussed and approved or disapproved by all the adult members of the ideal future society. When a unified decision is impossible, and to resolve some complicated issues, the population asks for help from the most experienced professionals of different trades unified in Academies and Committees specialized in one particular domain. For the most complex questions there is an artificial intelligence that can calculate and suggest the best solution, but it is always the people who have the last word to make a final decision (ibid.).

This form of government is not explained in enough detail to verify its practicality. However, the fact that Efremov's utopian political system is presented as egalitarian indicates a perspective that is considerably distant from Stalinist totalitarianism. In fact, there are several passages in *Tumannost' andromedy* which suggest that oppression, in any form, is detrimental to the development of human civilization.

Her fear to speak frankly made Mven Mass indignant. He had been trained from childhood by history lessons, through books, films and music to hate all those who oppressed people, all the secret organizations that had existed in the past, everything that was hidden from the conscience and judgment of the people, everything that meant bloodshed and unhappiness. He could not tolerate the existence of oppression, even if it were only occasional, on their well-ordered earth! (Efremov 1980, 292).

This insight into the thoughts of Mven Mass, one of *Tumannost' andromedy*'s principal characters, sheds light on an important feature of the Thaw-era Soviet worldview. No longer living in an environment of fear inspired by state terror and enforced by the secret police, Soviet citizens began to speak more openly about their personal lives and the former tools of their oppression. Efremov, taking a bold step forward, developed a means to criticize the most

powerful symbol of Stalinist despotism – the secret police – by setting a humanist message in a narrative depicting a distant utopian society.

As I have argued above, the plot of Efremov's *Tumannost' andromedy* is more concerned with the social and personal than with the political or scientific. However, there are a number of passages concerning the history of Earth that detail the political, economic, and scientific breakthroughs leading to the creation of *Tumannost' Andromedy*'s utopia. Veda Kong, a talented archeologist and expert paleontologist, describes the history of Earth in terms of four major periods: the Era of Disunity, Era of World Unity, Era of Common Labor, and Era of the Great Ring.<sup>28</sup> Because her historical overview may elucidate Efremov's primary ideological message, I have chosen to include excerpts below.

Briefly but clearly Veda Kong spoke of the chief stages in the history of mankind. She spoke of the early epochs of man's existence, when there were numerous large and small nations that were in constant conflict owing to the economic and ideological hostility that divide their countries. She spoke very briefly and gave the era the name of the "Era of Disunity." People living in the Era of the Great Circle were not interested in lists of destructive wars and horrible sufferings or the so-called great rulers that filled the ancient history books. More important to them was the development of productive forces and the forming of ideas, the history of art and knowledge and the struggle to create a real man, the way in which the creative urge had been developed, and people had arrived at new conceptions of the world, of social relations and of the duty, rights and happiness of man, conceptions that had nurtured the mighty tree of communist society that flourished throughout the planet. In the Fission Age the struggle between old and new ideas had become more acute and had led to the division of the world into two camps – the old and the new states with differing economic systems. . . . The new social system was bound to win although victory was delayed on account of the difficulty of training people in the new spirit. The rebuilding of the world on communist lines entailed a radical economic change accompanied by the disappearance of poverty, hunger and heavy, exhausting toil. The changes brought

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<sup>28</sup> Era of Disunity (*ERM – era razobshchennogo mira*), the Era of World Unity (*EMV – era mirovogo vossoedineniia*), the Era of Common Labor (*EOT – era obshchego truda*), and the Era of the Great Ring (*EVK – era velikogo kol'tsa*).

about in the economy made necessary an intricate system to direct production and distribution and could only be put into effect by the inculcation of social consciousness in every person. . . . With inevitable persistence the new way of life had spread over the entire Earth and the many races and nations were united into a single friendly and wise family. Thus began the next era, the Era of World Unity (Efremov 1980, 65).

This “historical” interpretation of the near future envisions a world that is transformed by Communism both politically and economically. Veda Kong claims that, at the end of the Era of Disunity, Communism was responsible for liberating humanity from oppression and poverty. However, it is critical to our understanding of Efremov’s message that this metamorphosis did not immediately lead to the utopia in which his characters exist. Human evolution could not be complete without “the training of the social consciousness of every individual” (Efremov 2016, 60).

Society developed more rapidly and each new age passed more speedily than the preceding one as man’s power over nature progressed with giant steps. . . . People soon realized that happiness can derive from labour, from a never-ceasing struggle against nature, the overcoming of difficulties and the solution of ever new problems arising out of the development of science and economy. . . . The development of cybernetics, the technique of automatic control, a comprehensive education and the development of intellectual abilities coupled with the finest physical training of each individual, made it possible for a person to change his profession frequently, learn another easily and bring endless variety into his work so that it became more and more satisfying. Progressively expanding science embraced all aspects of life and a growing number of people came to know the joy of the creator, the discovery of new secrets of nature. Art played a great part in social education and in forming the new way of life. Then came the most magnificent era in man’s history, the Era of Common Labour (Efremov 1980, 67).

In the Era of World Unity, technology led to the elimination of humanity’s need to work. Consequently, people began to pursue art, education, exploration, and fulfilment through intellectual labor. Humankind overcame its “ancient utopian dreams . . . of pleasant idleness”

which “arose out of man’s abhorrence of the arduous, exhausting toil of ancient days.” In this process, over the course of centuries, human nature was reshaped and its moral, physical, and social character was sharpened.

In her description of the Era of Common Labor, Veda Kong lists some of the ways in which science and technology hastened the development of their advanced civilization. She details the terraformation<sup>29</sup> of Earth to produce optimal amounts of food and allow people to inhabit the most comfortable climactic zones; she discusses the scientific breakthroughs that gave humans the ability to harness and harvest a nearly infinite amount of energy; and she details the technical history of the spaceships that were used to travel through our solar system and beyond.<sup>30</sup> The breakthrough that led to the utopian Era of the Great Ring, however, was a discovery made by single scientist: a message sent from another solar system.

Kam Amat received a signal from the planetary system of a binary star, long known as 61 Cygni. There appeared on the screen a man who, while dissimilar to us, was certainly a man, and he showed us a message written in the characters of the Great Circle (Efremov 2016, 59).

Efremov’s future envisions contact and interaction with alien beings throughout the cosmos. Similar to those in Aleksei Tolstoi’s *Aelita*, these alien lifeforms appear to be human in almost every respect. Critically, in Efremov’s vision it is not the Earth, but other advanced planets, that first establish communication in the Great Ring. The prospect of intelligent (and, possibly, more

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<sup>29</sup> This is a common term in science fiction referring to the transformation of a planet to efficiently sustain and support life.

<sup>30</sup> A prescient observation considering the fact that Sputnik was launched just after the first publication of *Tumannost’ andromedy*.

advanced) life on other planets serves as both an incentive to progress and a hope for further unity. This is one of the defining features of Efremov's text and is reflective of an important aspect of post-Stalinist Soviet identity. In contrast to the isolationist and secretive society that formed under Stalin, *Tumannost' andromedy* envisions a future in which openness and unity (whether between individuals, nations, or planets) are critical to the development of human civilization.

I have included an analysis of Veda Kong's history to frame my arguments concerning the evolution of the Soviet worldview and perceptions of national identity during the Thaw. As I have previously stated, Russian society experienced a liberalization during Khrushchev's tenure that was accompanied by a partial opening of the so-called "Iron Curtain." Partially because they no longer feared arbitrary imprisonment, and partially because they were made more aware of the Western lifestyle, Soviet citizens began to more openly discuss issues from an international (rather than national) perspective. The dialogue accompanying the launch of Sputnik, for example, created new avenues in both exploration and international relations, while the infamous "Kitchen Debate" between U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev in 1959 opened a society-wide conversation about living conditions. This feature of Thaw-era culture points to a mitigation of the antagonism between "us" and "them" in Berdiaev's model of Russian identity. As the reputed agency of the Soviet leadership diminished in tandem with the growth of individual freedoms, a segment of Soviet society began to embrace a more panhumanistic ideology. Efremov's *Tumannost' andromedy* served as a vessel for expressing

this new worldview – one which had an impact on Russian national identity that can still be identified in the Russian Federation of the present day (more on that in Chapter Three).

Soviet society's shift from isolationism and secrecy to openness and freedom was short-lived. Nikita Khrushchev, the only Soviet leader to ever be removed from the country's top position, created the circumstances for his own downfall. Aside from the many blunders for which Khrushchev was known in his later years, including the Cuban Missile Crisis, the failed restructuring of the Soviet bureaucracy, and his so-called "Corn Policy," the most damning instrument of his destruction was a consequence of the liberalization that he had overseen. Openness in Communist Party meetings (where dissent could reach a mass audience), rehabilitation of political prisoners (who viewed him as a symbol of their former oppression), and greater freedom of expression for individuals resulted in an environment in which Khrushchev could not adequately justify his position either to the people or to the Communist bureaucracy. Today considered one of the weakest rulers in Soviet history (Levada Analytical Center 2018), Khrushchev provoked a powerful reaction to liberalist ideology in the party apparatus.

Khrushchev's successor, Leonid Brezhnev, ultimately became the second longest ruler of the Soviet Union (after Stalin). At the start of his tenure as leader, he instituted policies to stymie the growth of the liberal trend in Soviet society and consolidate power in the party apparatus. However, although censorship was strengthened and conservatism dominated in the political arena, the impact of the Thaw could still be felt in the sociocultural sphere throughout the Stagnation period and beyond. Particularly in the realm of *fantastika*, many artists continued to



present panhumanist and apolitical perspectives as superior to official state notions of Soviet identity.

### Evgenii Sherstobitov's *Tumannost' andromedy*

The opening of cultural and national boundaries in the Soviet Union did not end with Leonid Brezhnev's promotion to General Secretary in 1964. As with Stalin and the revolutionary Bolsheviks after Lenin's death, a power struggle began within the Communist Party leadership following Khrushchev's removal. As in the 1920s, this political infighting eventually led to the ascension of a single dominant ruler. However, unlike Stalin's use of purges and oppression to quell dissent within the party, Brezhnev consolidated power gradually and through relatively peacefully means.

Brezhnev was a political actor who knew well the 'corridors of power,' was used to 'playing on a team' and not separately. He was careful, unhurried, willing to listen to the opinions of his colleagues, wary of sudden turns or sharp new directions, preferring the aforementioned stability. . . . He did not concern himself much with problems of ideology and didn't show much interest in them (Dobrynin 1996, 121).

Party members had a greater voice under Brezhnev and his successors than they did under Lenin, Stalin, or Khrushchev. Critically, the restrictive rules on political positions that Khrushchev implemented were removed – allowing the *nomenklatura* system to flourish (Carter 1990, 75). Ultimately, this resulted in a bureaucracy that was considerably more (internally) democratic than that of either the Stalinist or Khrushchevian periods (Service 2005, 382; Bacon and Sandle 2002, 11). Unfortunately, however, the relative freedoms of average individuals in Soviet society diminished over the course of the 1960s with a rise in conservatism that accompanied Brezhnev's consolidation of power. In the political sphere, the anti-liberal tendencies that preceded Khrushchev's removal grew stronger the longer Brezhnev's gerontocracy continued to function.

While it is tempting to associate the inception of the Stagnation period with Brezhnev's confirmation as General Secretary in 1964, the turning point in the Soviet sociocultural atmosphere that is characteristic of the period came in the aftermath of the Siniavskii-Daniel Trial (1965-1966). According to historian Robert Service, the trial of the writers Iulii Daniel' and Andrei Siniavskii in 1966 — the first public trials since the Stalin era — marked the reversion to a repressive cultural policy (Service 2005, 381-2). Service describes the case as a sign that the Brezhnev regime had reverted to more Stalinist methods of state control — including the secret police and GULAG. However, he qualifies this assertion by underlining their relatively restrained use by the regime:

Yet Brezhnev and his colleagues refrained from all-out violent suppression. They had not forgotten how the Great Terror had affected party leaders such as they had now become. Furthermore, they did not want to incur greater hostility from the intelligentsia than was absolutely necessary; they continually stressed that they would treat the opinions of professional experts seriously. Consequently, dissent was not eliminated, but was held at a low level of intensity (Service 2005, 382).

While the most powerful symbols of domestic terror were revived, therefore, their powers were considerably limited. In the process of socio-political stabilization under Brezhnev, the natural inclination was to look back to the period before the Thaw for inspiration — much as early Khrushchevian ideologues had looked back to the 1920s — but from an enlightened perspective. No longer equipped or inclined to maintain the type of absolute control wielded by Stalin, Soviet leaders sought to create a more sustainable balance between individualist liberalism and collectivist conservatism. Arguably, they succeeded in maintaining relative stability (the Russian term “*zastoi*,” after all, implies equilibrium and stasis) until the death of Konstantin

Chernenko in 1985. Regardless of how one might choose to periodize the Stagnation period, it is safe to say that, from the conclusion of the Siniavskii-Daniel Trial until the end of the era, official opinions advocating cultural conservatism became increasingly more common and widespread.

The reason that I have chosen to include *Tumannost' andromedy* in my analysis of Thaw-era *fantastika* is because, although it premiered in the year following Brezhnev's infamous Show Trial, its primary features indicate that it is ideologically rooted in a form of the Soviet worldview that is distinctly characteristic of the Thaw. Whether or not we should consider its cinematography or directorial style as representative of the period is a matter of debate.<sup>31</sup> However, as I will illustrate through my analysis of the film's narrative, the essential message of *Tumannost' andromedy* is a natural and mature reflection of the Thaw-era Soviet worldview.

Evgenii Sherstobitov's adaptation premiered in 1967. In light of Efremov's reputation and the popularity of his novel, it is not surprising that the film was greeted by an anxious public. In 1968, two viewers wrote:

If a solid line is formed at the theater cashier's office at eight o'clock in the morning, and those who were late are enquiring about "extra tickets," this already says something about the popularity of a film. This is just as it was at the October theater on the day of the premier of *Tumannost' andromedy* (Petrov 1968).

So, the cinematic variant of "Andromeda:" it is understandable that viewers flocked to the doors of the movie theater with such interest. . . . [A]nd thus the film has been watched, and maybe more than once (L'vov 1968).

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<sup>31</sup> An argument could be made that Evgenii Sherstobitov, a classmate of Andrei Tarkovskii's at *VGIK*, was a member of the *auteur* school of cinema. However, *Tumannost' andromedy* is not an *auteur* film in the contemporary understanding of the term for a variety of reasons (including its budget, style, and cinematography).

The screenplay for *Tumannost' andromedy* bears the subtitle “Part I: Prisoners of the Iron Star” (*Chast' I: Plenniki zheleznoi zvezdy*).<sup>32</sup> The film is based on a portion of Efremov's novel that describes the spaceship *Tantra* and its encounter with a so-called “Iron Star.” In addition to the narrative dealing with the *Tantra*'s crew, a parallel story unfolds on Earth that is characteristically domestic: a budding romance between old friends. The interweaving of these two narratives creates an image of a future society that is distinct from the one featured in Efremov's novel. Since my focus in the previous section was on the ideological foundations of Efremov's fictional utopia, I will concentrate here on the film's narrative.

*Tumannost' andromedy* begins with a voice narration against a background of stars: “To you, living in the twentieth century! To you, living in the first century of the Communist Era!” (Sherstobitov 1967). From the outset of the film, an association is established between present-day Communist countries and Efremov's future utopian society. Surprisingly, however, there are no other mentions of Communism, the Soviet Union, or any other political system in Sherstobitov's entire adaptation. As with Kazanskii and Chebotarev's *Chelovek-amfibiia*, the plot of *Tumannost' andromedy* is predominantly apolitical – focusing instead on personal and social themes.

Sherstobitov's adaptation is centered on four primary characters: Erg Noor, Niza Krit, Dar Veter, and Veda Kong. These individuals are depicted as evolved members of a utopian society. Erg Noor, the captain of the *Tantra*, is bold, fearless, and self-assured – even in the most

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<sup>32</sup> Based on the title, there is speculation that a second feature film was planned as a sequel to *Tumannost' andromedy*. However, there is no evidence that this project was ever initiated.

precarious situations. After finding his ship trapped on a planet orbiting the Iron Star and losing a young crewmember to a dark alien specter, Noor motivates his team with stoic fortitude.

Ingrid: Our boy, Erg, you know that he emulated you in everything. . . . He trained his will furiously.

Noor: I alone will answer for what happened, but it only makes sense to talk about that on Earth.

Kholm: On Earth? Commander, do you still believe in such a possibility?

Noor: As long as I'm alive, I believe. . .

(Sherstobitov 1967)

However, while the captain appears to possess confidence and an iron will, he is also emotionally sensitive. Niza Krit, the *Tantra*'s astronavigator, declares her love to Noor but is subsequently paralyzed while trying to save him. In an emotional homage, Noor sits on a stairwell and reads a poem given to him by his fallen partner.

With your love,  
and the memories of it,  
I am stronger,  
Than all kings on earth.  
(Sherstobitov 1967)

This scene is designed to inspire empathy in a broad audience: Noor has lost a crewmember, a lover, and has failed in his duties as captain. His face betrays little emotion, but the viewer cannot help but to empathize with his implicit feelings of loss and regret. As in *Chelovek-amfibiia*, the pathos of such scenes helps to create a genuine connection between viewers and the characters. More importantly, it highlights the value of social relationships in the individual's personal life.

When Noor is later given the opportunity to erase his painful memories with a medical procedure, he experiences an ethical and rational conflict. At first, he is convinced by the crew that suffering is objectively bad and that his memories can only hurt him.

Luma: Erg . . . I have to tell you that modern neuroscience has delved into the process of the occurrence of emotions. . . . I mean that medicine has the ability to act on the brain sensors that control the most powerful emotions. . . . And could. . .

Erg Noor: You are proposing to manipulate my feelings of love and thus relieve me from suffering?

Luma: People shouldn't suffer. Suffering deprives you of reason, and your reason is needed by the crew.

Eon Tal: She's right, Erg. She's right.

Erg Noor: I agree.

(Sherstobitov 1967)

However, as Noor begins to undergo the procedure, he has an epiphany regarding the value of suffering. With an electronic device attached to his head, Noor fights the effects of the machine until it malfunctions.

Luma: Erg! . . . Erg, what's wrong? . . . Erg, are you feeling sick?

Erg Noor: That's it. . . . "I am stronger, than all kings on earth."

Luma: Erg!

Erg Noor: You do not understand. No, Luma, no. I will not give up my feelings, even if they cause me suffering. Suffering, if it is not above one's strength, leads to understanding, and understanding leads to love. Thus, the circle is complete. You have been kind to me, thank you. But there will not be another session, Luma.

(Sherstobitov 1967)

In this final scene aboard the *Tantra*, Noor claims that suffering is a natural precursor to love. He chooses to preserve painful memories of failure and loss, believing that they will inspire him to better understand the universe. Favoring knowledge over bliss, Noor justifies his decision with a decidedly rational argument. However, his mechanical repetition of a line from Niza's poem

suggests that this epiphany is at least partially inspired by emotion. Not willing to lose the feelings associated with Niza, Noor chooses suffering over peace.

*Tumannost' andromedy* approaches individual and social issues from a sophisticated perspective. Moreover, like Chebotarev and Kazanskii's *Chelovek-amfibiia*, Sherstobitov's adaptation is predominantly apolitical. Thus, while it might be taken for granted that Sherstobitov's fictional society is a replica of Efremov's, there is no indication in the film of Earth's political system or predominant ideology. Instead, individual and social themes take priority in the narrative: even in this presumably utopian society, personal emotions and ethical dilemmas continue to have a salient presence in everyday life.

The most powerful scenes set on Sherstobitov's Earth involve dialogue between two principal characters: Dar Veter and Veda Kong. Veter, a renowned scientist and "Director of the Outer Stations of the Great Ring," romantically pursues Kong, a famous historian and archeologist. Their interactions resemble an endearing courtship, and it is evident from their conversations that they harbor romantic feelings for one another. However, Kong is reluctant to give herself over to Veter for one primary reason.

Dar Veter: But I love you!

Veda Kong: You forget, Veter. There is still him – Erg Noor.

Dar Veter: Do you really still love him?

Veda Kong: No, I don't.

Dar Veter: Then you are free, what is holding you back? What?

Veda Kong: I saw him off. I must welcome him back.

(Sherstobitov 1967)

Kong refuses to engage in a romantic relationship with Veter out of fidelity to Erg Noor. Thus, a love triangle exists between Veter, Kong, and the captain of the *Tantra*. While Kong claims that



she no longer loves Noor, she considers it her duty to patiently await his return. Her actions exhibit a high-level social consciousness: although tempted to start a romantic relationship with Veter, she considers it improper to discuss the possibility while Noor is absent. Veter, who claims to be jaded by his position and in search of a new profession, ultimately chooses to work on an archeological site with Kong. However, even after reigniting a close personal relationship, Kong continues to rebuff his advances.

Veda Kong: Veter, I am not asking because I am somehow sure. . . . You will not leave the expedition. You will not leave me. . . . In the spring we will go to the sea. You, of course, are free to choose any profession, but my friends really like you.  
Dar Veter: Veda! . . . We aren't children . . . when will it be possible to speak seriously with you?  
Veda Kong: Only then, when the *Tantra* has returned.  
(Sherstobitov 1967)

Because Sherstobitov's adaptation ends with the return of *Tantra* to Earth, it is impossible to determine the couple's ultimate fate. However, these passages solidify the impression that social responsibility is a foundational value in Sherstobitov's future society. Steadfast in her dedication to Erg Noor, Veda Kong chooses loyalty over the prospect of romantic fulfillment.

The depiction of intimate personal relationships in *Tumannost' andromedy* betrays a worldview that is predominantly interested in individual and interpersonal issues. Thus, while the primary action of the film involves the adventures of the *Tantra*'s crew – which include a crash landing, the discovery of an alien spacecraft, and encounters with menacing extraterrestrials – the film's underlying message is expressed through dialogue between the four principal characters.

*Tumannost' andromedy* exhibits a complexity in dealing with individual and social themes that is a mature reflection of the Thaw-era Soviet worldview. Not content with creating a mere imitation of Efremov's utopian society, Sherstobitov contributed to the development of Soviet *fantastika* by detailing complicated ethical dilemmas and close personal relationships. In many ways, Sherstobitov's film is a fulfillment of the dominant trends of the Thaw: it is essentially unconcerned with political ideology, designed to appeal to a broad audience, and predominantly focused on problems relevant to the individual. Rather than a counterbalance to the liberal trend in Soviet *fantastika* that one might expect in the immediate aftermath of the Siniavskii-Daniel Trial, therefore, *Tumannost andromedy* exhibits a worldview that is distinctly in line with the prevailing trends of the previous period.

## **Soviet *Fantastika* during the Era of Stagnation:** **Auteur Cinema and Dissident Identity**

The truth is that the conservatives of the Brezhnev years offered no really convincing ideological innovations of any kind. . . . At the same time, the tide of public opinion and the beliefs of Soviet intellectuals were turning decisively away from official ideology. Totally new areas of thought and discussion were opening up, new political and social activism were evolving (Carter 1990, 78).

The so-called Era of Stagnation is one of the most complex periods of Soviet sociocultural history. In the aftermath of Khrushchev's liberalization, and in the midst of Brezhnev's crackdown on individual liberties, a growing number of Soviet citizens began to experiment with dissident culture – creating a split between “official” and “unofficial” narratives of Soviet identity (Beumers 2009, 146). As noted in Chapter 1, an underground movement of dissent was present even at the height of Stalinist oppression. However, the liberalizing policies of the Thaw created a unique space that allowed a flourishing of cultural dialogue in the artistic and domestic spheres. This led to the rise of a growing class of openly dissident intellectuals, members of the so-called “intelligentsia,” many of whom began to take part in activities that had been considered “counter-revolutionary” under Stalin's leadership. According to historian Marshall S. Shatz,

[W]riters and scientists occupy a position in Soviet society analogous to that of the educated nobility in imperial Russia of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In both cases, a relatively privileged position permitted the rise of a new consciousness of individual worth, generating a demand for greater autonomy from state controls; education enabled such individuals to articulate their grievances; and a strong sense of service to their society impelled them to speak out despite the obvious risks of such behavior. Both groups were privileged enough to be provoked by the treatment they

received at the hands of the state, instead of merely acquiescing in it, as most citizens would do, but not privileged enough to defend themselves effectively against it. It is for this reason that Soviet poets, biologists, novelists, mathematicians, and physicists [began] to express the same demands for independence of thought and the protection of elemental human and civil rights that Radishchev and his fellow nobles began to voice more than a century and a half ago (Shatz 1980, 148).

The parallel that Shatz draws between the imperial Russian nobility and the dissident Soviet intelligentsia is salient. Like the nobles, many members of the intelligentsia were themselves benefactors of the Soviet *nomenklatura* system, owing their education, employment, and socioeconomic status to the state.<sup>33</sup> These intellectuals were products of the Soviet system, but many viewed that system as flawed and in desperate need of renovation. Especially among the younger generation, born after World War II, an apathy toward politics and cynicism of stagnant ideology inspired an urge to express themselves creatively and intellectually (Shatz 1980, 150).

Vladimir Vysotskii, Evgenii Evtushenko, and other Soviet “Bard Poets” of the late-1950s and 1960s are perhaps the most well-known members of the *shestidesiatniki* (another term for the first-generation intelligentsia that embraced Thaw-Era liberalism). More pertinent to our discussion, however, the Thaw inspired the rise of a new class of *fantastika* writers: intellectuals who succeeded in pushing the boundaries of censorship in order to express complex philosophical and ethical messages. In turn, these authors inspired a new school of directors to create artistic adaptations in the subsequent decades. During the culturally conservative Stagnation period, these so-called *auteur* directors took advantage of their privileged status to

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<sup>33</sup> A great number of intellectuals (and dissidents) of the 1960s and 1970s, including most of the authors and directors of *fantastika* discussed in my analysis, received both their education and subsequent employment as a result of Stalinist policies (Shatz 1980, 139).

create films that could address sociocultural issues ignored by mainstream cinema (Beumers 2009, 146). Many of these films, which were subject to rigid censorship, succeeded in approaching complex ideological subjects from novel, apolitical perspectives.

Andrei Tarkovskii, whose *Solaris* and *Stalker* are today considered among the finest examples of *fantastika* cinema in Soviet history, entered the Soviet Institute of Cinematography (*VGIK*) at a critical time – just after the death of Joseph Stalin (Ciment and Schnitzer 2006, 17). By the time he graduated in 1960, Tarkovskii had witnessed a monumental transformation in the Soviet film industry and established himself as a promising figure in artistic cinema. In 1962, his first feature film, *Ivanovo detstvo*, won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and earned him a reputation as a promising Soviet *auteur* (Venice Film 2019). At the height of the Thaw, just after Kazanskii and Chebotarev's *Chelovek-amfibiia* stirred Soviet audiences with its apolitical message, it may have seemed that Tarkovskii was on course to become a celebrity of post-Stalinist cinema. Unfortunately, however, Tarkovskii's subsequent project became one of the first major casualties of Brezhnev's effort to reign in artistic and sociocultural freedom.

*Andrei Rublev*, a film concerning the life of a famous fifteenth-century Russian icon painter, fell victim to Brezhnev's rejuvenated censorship apparatus. Filmed in 1965, Tarkovskii's biopic was repeatedly subject to cuts and revisions over the course of several years (Beumers 2009, 165). Although it received an award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969, it was only released to Soviet audiences in redacted form in 1971 (Cannes 2019). Like the case of the Siniavskii-Daniel Trial of 1955-1956, it appears that the Soviet bureaucracy sought to make an example of Tarkovskii as an artist who had gone too far. *Andrei Rublev* was a casualty of the

movement, instituted and enforced from above, to stymie the growth of individualism and liberalism in Soviet society.

As a director held in suspicion by the very bureaucracy that oversaw his training and rise to success, Tarkovskii experienced a personal struggle regarding his identity as a Soviet artist over the course of his career. In 1972, the director's first foray into the *fantastika* genre (*Solaris*) received several international awards and appeared to reestablish his connection with Soviet mainstream cinema. Unfortunately, however, virtually all of his subsequent films, including the internationally celebrated *Stalker* (1979), were met with severe censorship and relegated to limited (and often delayed) domestic releases (Beumers 2009, 165). Perhaps best illustrated by this quote from an interview in 1984, the censorship and criticism directed at him by the Soviet bureaucracy had a profoundly negative impact on Tarkovskii's perception of his own artistic accomplishments.

I cannot understand this. Bondarchuk, even Yermash, who was I think under great pressure from my colleagues [betrayed me], I can understand all this, not forgive but . . . but my government—all my films were sold abroad to earn hard currency, I was of quite considerable use to the state, I was trying to increase the glory of Soviet cinema. But my films never got Soviet awards, were never shown at Soviet film festivals. . . . And yet I have never been a dissident, I always considered myself a poet. I'm talking about my rights; all I wanted to do was make films, and yet I have only been allowed to make five in twenty years (Tarkovsky 2006, 157).

Tarkovskii does not identify as a dissident, but his statement of regret regarding a stunted and tumultuous career indicates that he was essentially treated as an “other” by the Soviet bureaucracy. This was also the case for Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii, writers who never identified as dissidents, but were chastised and limited by a bureaucracy that saw their work as a

threat to the status quo (Strugatskii 2003, 191). Both Tarkovskii and the Strugatskiis were products of Thaw-era ideology, exploiting new liberties and embracing the freedom to criticize totalitarianism. However, they were viewed by the Stagnation-era leadership as representatives of a rebellious class – one that threatened to split society and delegitimize the conservative regime.

Stanislaw Lem, the Polish writer who authored the eponymous work adapted for Tarkovskii's *Solaris*, was also a beneficiary of a liberal transition in the Soviet sphere of influence. As a writer who began to flourish during the “Gomulka Thaw,”<sup>34</sup> Lem succeeded in producing a large number of *fantastika* novels, scientific studies, and critical analyses of international science fiction (Ziegfeld 1985, 6). These works approach a variety of complex scientific, sociocultural, and philosophical themes that were previously unexplored in Soviet (or international) science fiction. Credited by American author Theodore Sturgeon as the “most widely read science-fiction writer in the world” (Sturgeon 1977, 3), Lem's reputation earned him a considerable readership in both the Soviet and Western spheres of influence.

Although it may seem illogical to include an analysis of Polish literature in my examination of Russian national identity, Lem's significance in the realm of international science fiction and wide publication in the Soviet Union made him a powerful voice in the post-Stalinist sociocultural space. Therefore, I have chosen to approach his writing through the frame of Soviet cultural discourse. This is not to suggest that Lem should be considered a characteristic member

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<sup>34</sup> A period of sociocultural liberalization inspired by Khrushchev's Secret Speech and overseen by reformist politician Wladislaw Gomulka.

of the Russian *fantastika* tradition – objectively, he is not – but rather to situate my evaluation of his influence in a Soviet-specific context.

The rise of the dissident movement during the Stagnation created a split society. On one side, the government and its supporters sought to recreate the Soviet sociocultural sphere in a more conservative image – introducing and enforcing policies that limited individual expression and penalized perceived infidelity or artistic indiscretion. On the other side, a growing number of Soviet citizens – inspired by the dissident intelligentsia – sought to expand the liberties enjoyed during the Thaw and experiment with new approaches to answering personal, social, and philosophical questions. It is in this historical context, one in which official and unofficial culture were in a constant struggle for dominance, that some of the most groundbreaking and influential works of Soviet *fantastika* cinema were created.

In my analysis of the fourth era of *fantastika* film adaptation, Andrei Tarkovskii's *Solaris* and *Stalker* will be investigated for signs of an emerging worldview in Soviet society during the Stagnation period. The impact of reinvigorated censorship, the actions of writers and directors who sought to push the boundaries of the acceptable, and the humanistic and philosophical subjects and themes introduced in these works will serve as the foundation for an examination of the Soviet worldview as it developed from 1968 to 1985. As in the previous section, my aim is not to be comprehensive in my examination of this period of Soviet sociocultural history, but rather to emphasize critical areas in which a dissection of *fantastika* film adaptations may produce insight into the popular cultural dialogue of a given era.



## Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*

*Solaris* is about love and the mysterious ocean, and that is what is important about it.

— Stanislaw Lem (Lem 2006, 60)

Stanislaw Lem was both a uniquely inspired artist and a complicated figure. A Jewish writer who experienced Nazi occupation, Stalinism, and the fall of the Soviet Union, Lem was a cosmopolitan by historical circumstance. Although his education was partially limited on account of his ethnic origins, Lem had a voracious appetite for knowledge and a keen eye for criticism (Davis 1990, 2). He became a polyglot at a young age, developing an interest in both science and literature with the support of his father, a wealthy physician (Lem 1995, 13). After completing medical school in 1950 at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, nearly a decade after he first entered the L'viv Medical School under Nazi occupation, Lem “received a certificate of completion of medical studies but refused to take the last exams in order to avoid a career as a military doctor” (Lem 2018).<sup>35</sup> He turned instead to the development of his career as a writer and literary critic, which had seen its first success in 1946.

Although Lem's earliest writings were censored by the Stalinist bureaucracy, they earned him a considerable reputation in the Eastern bloc. According to literary critic J. Madison Davis:

As his first novel had come into conflict with the “official” acceptable style of Socialist Realism and was not published, so Lem's surveys of scientific periodicals for *Zycie nauki* ran into conflict with “official” science. . . . Despite these battles, Lem's first science-fiction novels were making him the most famous writer in that genre in the Eastern bloc. *Astronaucci* (*The Astronauts*) was published in 1951. *Sezam* (*Sesame*) . . . and *Oblok Magellena* (*The Magellan Cloud*) soon followed. The latter book, though written in 1952-1953, had its publication delayed for a year because it had used the

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<sup>35</sup> Lem's studies were interrupted by the Nazi occupation of L'viv. After the Soviet army took control of the city, Lem's family was repatriated to Krakow (Lem 2018).

false, capitalist science of cybernetics in it. Polish critics dubbed him a writer for children and young people, but the novels were reprinted many times. His books became extraordinarily popular in both Poland and the Soviet Union. . . . Both [*The Astronauts*] and *The Magellan Cloud* became required reading in Polish schools. Although Lem would later state that he was ashamed of these early books because they were elementary stylistically and philosophically, they were the beginning of his rise to a position as the major writer of science fiction in Eastern Europe (Davis 1990, 6).

During Gomulka's Thaw, Lem was able to publish novels that he (and, incidentally, international critics) considered on par with the most influential works of Western science fiction (Potts 1991, 7). The sci-fi novels that Lem wrote during the Thaw were a far cry from *fantastika blizhnego pritsela* and distinguished themselves from mainstream socialist realism through complex character development and a focus on personal, social, and philosophical themes. Describing the evolution of his literary career, Lem made the following statement in a German-language autobiographical essay.

I think that at the beginning of my path as a writer I wrote exclusively second-rate literature. In my second phase ("Solaris," "Nepobedimy"), I reached the boundaries of that territory which had generally been explored already [in sci-fi]. In the third phase, for instance, in my pseudo-reviews, in my forwards to books which "will be written some time in the future," or (as currently) in a survey of books, which "should have come out long ago but still haven't," I went beyond the borders of the territory previously explored (Lem 1992, 21).

*Solaris*, his most popular novel both domestically and internationally, belongs to the second phase (Davis 1990, 22). Although the author himself did not consider the works produced during the Thaw to be his best,<sup>36</sup> they earned him a reputation as a major writer in international science

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<sup>36</sup> Lem believed that his greatest strengths were in critical theory. However, his most popular writings are in the genre of *fantastika* (Davis 1990, 2).

fiction. According to some critics, including historian Richard E. Ziegfeld, this second phase represents the “golden era” of Lem’s writing.

Lem’s period of mature writing began after 1956. During the dozen years between 1956 and 1968 Lem was extremely productive, writing nineteen projects. These include five science-fiction novels, ten books of science-fiction short stories . . . one science fiction play, and three television plays. He also wrote a book on cybernetic sociology and his theoretical masterpiece – *Summa technologiae* – a 650-page treatise that has been described as “breathhtakingly brilliant and risky.” During these years he published the works that garnered him a pan-European reputation as one of the strongest literary writers of the mid-twentieth century. . . . Lem’s work became very popular, especially with Russian readers, so that his books have been translated into thirty languages and have sold well over eleven million copies. By the end of the twelve-year golden period, positive critical commentary was abundant. Lem was being hailed as “the Titan of East European science fiction” and as “one of the most significant SF writers of our century and a distinctive voice in world literature” (Ziegfeld 1985, 6-7).

Lem’s popular success granted him a special status in Soviet culture. As an artist living in the Communist Polish People’s Republic during Gomulka’s Thaw, he was in a unique position to introduce novel ideas to the Soviet public for two reasons. First, Gomulka’s leadership, which envisioned a “Polish road to socialism,” oversaw a mitigation of Soviet (Russian) influence in the country beginning in 1956. This, in addition to the fact that he wrote in the genre of science fiction, considered “an intellectual backwater” of little consequence by Communist censors, allowed Lem to publish many of the works from his second phase with little bureaucratic interference (Tighe 1990, 68). Lem’s works garnered considerable popularity in the Eastern Bloc, and Russian editions of his texts were voraciously consumed by the Soviet public (Davis 1990, 6). Second, Lem’s familiarity with Western literature gave him a significantly wider range of topics and themes to call upon than his Soviet counterparts – many of whom had been raised

on the ideologically confined tradition of socialist realism. This allowed Lem to distinguish himself among authors in Eastern Europe and approach topics previously addressed in Western literature with comparative maturity. These factors, in addition to his popularity in the international arena, granted the Polish author a privileged position in Soviet culture. Particularly in comparison to Russian authors Boris and Arkadii Strugatskii (whose *Piknik na obochine*, *Trudno byt' bogom*, *Obitaemyi ostrov*, and *Gadkie lebedi* I discuss later), Stanislaw Lem enjoyed considerable leniency from the censors. Citizens of the Soviet Union, who had experienced their first major encounter with Western science fiction during the Thaw, continued to have access to Lem's ideas throughout both the Stagnation and subsequent periods.

Stanislaw Lem's oeuvre is complex and the range of subjects that he approaches is extensive (Lem 2006, 4). *Solaris*, first published in Russian in 1961, is undoubtedly his best-known masterpiece. Serving as the basis for two feature films and at least one Soviet television special, Lem's novel weaves together three principal plot lines that explore complex personal, social, and philosophical questions. The most prominent plot line in *Solaris* involves the novel's hero, Kris Kelvin, and his personal adventure orbiting the planet Solaris.

It begins, as do many of Lem's books, by thrusting the main character, Kris Kelvin, into an unfamiliar situation. The readers' experience of the events thus parallels Kelvin's. As the launch begins, readers see (from Kelvin's point of view) the canopy above them, feel the air conditioning on their necks, and hear the grating sound, "like a steel blade being drawn across a sheet of wet glass." Surrounded by sensual experiences, readers feel Kelvin's excitement and fear, his momentary panic when he thinks he may have overshot his mark. All of this is so immediate, time isn't given to consider where Kelvin is going or why. Readers are living the events along with him (Davis 1990, 22).

The beginning of Kelvin's adventure is fast-paced, bewildering, and distinctly personal. Readers experience the protagonist's point of view in immersive detail, left in complete ignorance of his motivations and backstory. Arriving at the space station orbiting Solaris, Kelvin discovers that one of the vessel's scientists has committed suicide. He struggles to come to terms with this unexpected event, but is constantly distracted by the chaotic environment.

In the second chapter we are introduced to the hero's background and the purpose of his journey through space. As a professional "Solarist," Kelvin relays the history of a scientific field developed specifically to study a single planet. Because Kelvin's history of "solaristics" is relatively long (over five pages in the Kilmartin/Cox translation) and considerably dense,<sup>37</sup> I have chosen to include four short excerpts to illustrate Lem's style and justify my approach to examining the narrative.

The discovery of Solaris dated from about 100 years before I was born. The planet orbits two suns: a red sun and a blue sun. For 45 years after its discovery, no spacecraft had visited Solaris. At that time, the Gamow-Shapley theory – that Life was impossible on planets which are satellites of two solar bodies – was firmly believed. . . . A few decades later, however, observations seemed to suggest that the planet's orbit was in no way subject to the expected variations: it was stable, as stable as the orbit of the planets in our own solar system. The observations and calculations were reworked with great precision; but they simply confirmed the original conclusions: Solaris's orbit was unstable. . . .

Just when a measure of success had been achieved in unravelling this problem, it turned out, as often happened subsequently in the field of Solarist studies, that the explanation replaced one enigma by another, perhaps even more baffling. Observations showed, at least, that the ocean did not react according to the same principles as our gravitors (which, in any case, would have been impossible), but succeeded in controlling the orbital periodicity directly. One result, among others, was the discovery of discrepancies in the measurement of time along one and the same

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<sup>37</sup> If Aleksei Tolstoi established a tradition in Soviet literature of using dense technical descriptions to imbue fantastic works with greater realism, Lem's *Solaris* takes this to an almost parodic extreme.

meridian on Solaris. Thus, the ocean was not only in a sense "aware" of the Einstein-Boëvia theory; it was also capable of exploiting the implications of the latter (which was more than we could say of ourselves). . . .

All this happened several years before I was born. When I was a student – new data having accumulated in the meantime – it was already generally agreed that there was life on Solaris, even if it was limited to a single inhabitant . . . [although] in fact, by no means was everybody yet convinced that the ocean was actually a living 'creature,' and still less, it goes without saying, a rational one. . . .

The sum total of known facts was strictly negative. . . . Gradually, in scientific circles, the 'Solaris Affair' came to be regarded as a lost cause. . . . Many people in the world of science, however, especially among the young, had unconsciously come to regard the 'affair' as a touchstone of individual values. All things considered, they claimed, it was not simply a question of penetrating Solarist civilization; it was essentially a test of ourselves, of the limitations of human knowledge. . . . These hypotheses resurrected one of the most ancient of philosophical problems: the relation between matter and mind, and between mind and consciousness (Lem 1970, 19-23).

The first of these excerpts introduces a tradition of scientific study motivated by a logical anomaly: a planet that should not support life, yet does. Here Lem illustrates a problem with seemingly universal implications that, when first approached by the scientific community, yielded objectively contradictory results. The second excerpt emphasizes the difficulty that scientists face in exploring the unknown: when one question is answered, a greater problem inevitably arises. It also establishes that the planet Solaris may not only be alive, but also sentient. The third excerpt, which includes an apparent self-contradiction by the first-person narrator, situates solaristics in Kelvin's personal life. Thus, although the protagonist is portrayed as an academic in a field with a long tradition, Lem emphasizes the individual relationship that his hero has with the study of the planet. The final excerpt indicates two ways that humankind sought to approach the problem of Solaris. For some, the overwhelming nature of the problem

and a lack of success on the project led to withdrawal. For others, a “call to arms” was issued to expand the “limitations of human knowledge” and take the next step forward in the human understanding of cognition. As a scientist traveling to study the planet in person, readers recognize Kelvin as a member of the latter group.

I have touched on the narrative concerning Kelvin’s relationship to Solaris to make a point concerning the role of the individual in Lem’s novel. Conspicuously, *Solaris* is the only work in my entire study that completely foregoes omniscient storytelling for first-person narration. Although the descriptions of Solaris’ oceans and its theoretical agency create a mystery that might appeal to any curious mind, *Solaris*’ narrative style creates a close and continuous connection between Kelvin and his field of study. The hero is not only a scientist, but also an individual who has chosen to challenge himself in search of answers to humankind’s greatest questions. Moreover, his relationship to the alien planet becomes increasingly complex as the novel progresses: Kelvin experiences hallucinations of his deceased wife, witnesses strange signal-like mutations on the planet’s surface, and ultimately makes physical contact by interacting with one of its dynamic formations. Like Ivan Efremov’s *Tumannost’ andromedy*, Lem’s *Solaris* places significant emphasis on the protagonist’s personal approach to, and individual relationship with, the unknown. Similar to the other works discussed in my examination of Thaw-era *fantastika*, *Solaris* emphasizes the value of individual ethics and social responsibility by creating a distinctly personal narrative surrounding the primary character.

Fittingly in the context of Thaw-era *fantastika*, the second layer of Lem’s narrative is primarily concerned with social and domestic issues. This secondary plot line centers around

Kelvin and his relationship with Hari (Rheya in the Kilmartin/Cox translation), a hallucinated phantom of his long-deceased wife. Through a conversation between Kelvin and a colleague named Snaut, readers learn that Kelvin's former wife committed suicide after he abandoned her following a domestic dispute. Described as a byproduct of the planet's sophisticated cognition, Kelvin's shipmate explains that the scientists circling the planet are each regularly visited by an individual "specter" from their past.

For Kelvin, Hari is a source of both hope and regret. Distraught at her unexpected appearance, he is both ashamed of his former betrayal and enticed by the prospect of a new chance to be with his beloved. However, as the hero gradually comes to terms with the fact that she is merely a hallucination, he faces a serious ethical dilemma. Ultimately, he must decide whether to continue a life of restored peace granted by his mysterious visitor, or to face the reality of Hari's passing and reject the phantom as nothing more than a manifestation of the mysterious planet.

Kelvin's personal struggle with this decision is presented in exquisite detail in Lem's novel. In his first meeting with the specter, Kelvin describes Hari as if she were a beautiful goddess but also hints at the discomfort he feels in her presence.

It was Rheya. She was wearing a white beach dress, the material stretched tightly over her breasts. She sat with her legs crossed; her feet were bare. Motionless, leaning on her sun-tanned arms, she gazed at me from beneath her black lashes: Rheya, with her dark hair brushed back. For a long time, I lay there peacefully gazing back at her. My first thought was reassuring: I was dreaming and I was aware that I was dreaming. Nevertheless, I would have preferred her not to be there. I closed my eyes and tried to shake off the dream. When I opened them again, Rheya was still sitting opposite me (Lem 1970, 28).



Apparently lovestruck, Kelvin begins to care for Hari as if she were his wife: feeding, cuddling, and even undressing her. Fully aware that she is a phantom, Kelvin feels an innate obligation to nurture Hari on account of their former intimacy. By including a visceral portrayal of Kelvin and Hari's complex interpersonal relationship, Lem provides a model for the deconstruction of feelings of loss and complicates the ethical dilemma witnessed by the reader. Kelvin is emotionally damaged by the death of his wife, compensating for his past mistakes by cultivating a relationship with the strange visitor. However, he also understands that the spectral manifestation of Hari is but an inexact simulacrum, leading him to question the morality of living with a shell of his former love.

Predictably, the primary way that Kelvin seeks to deal with the phantom is to remove her from his presence – just as he had done with his former wife. Upon discovering that Hari recalls memories of a friend that Kelvin met after her death, he locks her in an escape shuttle and fires it into space. He experiences guilt for sending her away, but decides that it is preferable to deal with the specter from a distance. The following evening, however, Kelvin is astonished to find that she has returned and has no recollection of the betrayal. Having literally abandoned Hari a second time, Kelvin's feelings of regret are further exacerbated when she attempts to commit suicide. As an ever-present reminder of his most painful memories, Hari's phantom forces Kelvin to confront his failures both directly and repeatedly.

In the end Lem offers no real answer to the ethical dilemma concerning Kelvin's relationship with Hari. The protagonist is constantly pulled between his emotional longings and rational logic concerning the impostor's exceptional nature, and it is unclear if he ever finds

closure in this internal struggle. Even the fact that Kelvin later volunteers for a scientific experiment to eliminate the phantom does not sufficiently convince the reader that he has made the right decision. Like many of the questions posed in *Solaris*, the audience is left to wonder whether or not the hero is acting ethically.

Similar to the narrative layer focused on social issues, the third plot line – which is devoted to broader, more philosophical themes – is intricately interconnected with Kelvin’s individual personality. Perhaps the most prominent subject Lem approaches in this narrative tangent is the question of human cognition and its theoretical limits. Readers experience Kelvin’s thoughts on language and the human mind immersively, inundated with both fabricated technical jargon and seemingly unintelligible explanations of “linguistic” planetary phenomena. The discovery of a way to communicate with the planet is Kelvin’s driving aspiration, but he worries that inherent problems of cognition are a limiting factor in humanity’s inability to comprehend entities outside of its experience.

Lem approaches the philosophy of mind more playfully with detailed descriptions of *Solaris*’ enigmatic oceanic terraformations. Carl Freedman, in his *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, describes the function of these phenomena in a particularly articulate way. He writes,

One of the most remarkable activities of the ocean is its creation of “mimoids,” huge and immensely complex formations thrown up from the surface of the planet, and which Solarists have interpreted as sensory organs, as limbs, as means of communication, and in various other ways, without being able to attain verification of any of these hypotheses. Kelvin synesthetically describes one variety of mimoid as “a symphony in geometry, but we lack the ears to hear it.” And this sort of deliberately paradoxical, almost anti-visual imagery informs the extensive physical descriptions that often seem quite lucid and detailed in their particulars but that, when taken as wholes, turn out to be effectively impossible to

visualize or remember. Though certainly spectacular, the mimoids are, it seems, just too different from anything in our earthly experience to assume for us any clear or even approximately stable meaning (Freedman 2000, 104).

Although able to observe the ocean's activities from both macroscopic and microscopic perspectives, Solarists were still unable to describe these phenomena in any rational way. While Kelvin is motivated to consider the oceanic movements as a form of language, his musings indicate that these scientists were consistently unsuccessful in proving their hypotheses because of the inherent limitations of the human mind. The underdeveloped or ineffectual cognition of even the most intelligent individuals, according to his philosophy, is central to humankind's inability to comprehend that which is beyond its experience. If one can imagine Kelvin's internal monologues on the subject of cognition as a vessel for expressing the author's own theories, then it appears that, according to Lem, the human mind must be expanded before understanding and communication with the "other" is truly possible.

Notably, it was Kelvin's inability to adequately communicate with Hari that led to his personal misery. A domestic quarrel drove his wife to suicide, and an inability to relate to the phantom drove her to attempt the same. Kelvin's problem with interpersonal communication serves to tie together the three primary plot lines and betrays another aspect of human nature that Lem seeks to highlight throughout the narrative: although we are inspired to find answers to the universe's greatest questions, our understanding of even the most familiar ideas is fundamentally limited and, ultimately, flawed. Thus, while Kelvin is obsessed with the prospect of communication with the planet, he is inept at communicating with his closest partner. He is able to physically touch Solaris' oceanic formations, but he cannot make a single definitive statement

concerning their nature. He engages in a scientific field that has a long and meticulously detailed history, but is incapable of supporting even its most basic hypotheses. Humankind's inability to properly communicate with the "other," according to Lem, is one of the greatest obstacles to our understanding of the universe.

The inclusion of personal, social, and philosophical themes distinguishes Lem's novel from the predominant trends of Soviet *fantastika* during the Stalin era. Like Ivan Efremov's *Tumannost' andromedy*, *Solaris* approaches ethical and sociocultural questions from an individualist perspective. Moreover, while Efremov relegated political discourse to a secondary position, Lem's novel contains absolutely no hint of political thematics. Taking the Thaw-inspired freedom to address apolitical subjects to an extreme, Lem completely excludes any mention of political ideology in his work.

Lem's novel is a vibrant example of Soviet Thaw-era *fantastika* fiction. While the humanistic themes explored in the narrative are reminiscent of those typical of 1920s *fantastika*, *Solaris*' individualist approach to ethical and philosophical questions situates it firmly in the post-Stalinist tradition. Viewed from this perspective, Lem's novel may serve as further proof of my primary hypothesis concerning the evolution of the Soviet worldview during the Thaw: in the increasingly liberalized environment of the late 1950s and 1960s, Soviet artists began to relegate political discourse to a secondary position, instead focusing on predominantly personal and domestic themes.

Stanislaw Lem's influence on Soviet culture continued into the Stagnation period and beyond. In 1968, a two-part television special premiered as the first cinematic embodiment of

*Solaris*, followed by Andrei Tarkovskii's *auteur* adaptation in 1972. Thirty years later, in 2002, this novel served as the basis for yet another film adaptation – this time produced in Hollywood (Swirski 2006, 182). Boris Strugatskii considered Lem to be one of the most influential *fantastika* authors in Soviet history, including *Solaris* in his list of the top ten works of international *fantastika* ever published (just behind Efremov's *Tumannost' andromedy*) (Strugatskii 1995). Moreover, while American author Phillip K. Dick once denounced Lem as “a (Communist) composite committee rather than an individual,” suggesting that Lem's oeuvre was the product of a government conspiracy to manage public thought (Christmass 2015), the Polish author has continued to enjoy notable readership in the West to the present day (Davis 1990, 6).

### Andrei Tarkovskii's *Solaris*<sup>38</sup>

In the late 1960s, the relationship between the “official” and “dissident” ideological camps was transformed. With the liberties enjoyed during the Thaw curtailed under Brezhnev’s leadership, a portion of the intelligentsia began to identify with a movement that sought to challenge the “official” narrative through circumvention, criticism, and subversion. This counterculture, which stood as a balance to Brezhnev’s crackdown on cultural liberalism during the Stagnation period, was predominantly spearheaded by the privileged intelligentsia, many of whom were members of the educated elite. As a consequence of this split in the sociocultural sphere, many artists came to be labeled as either “official” or “dissident” according to their respective audiences. Thus, Thaw-era *fantastika* authors like Ivan Efremov, Boris and Arkadii Strugatskii, and Stanislaw Lem became symbols of the dissident camp – even though each would eschew the label themselves. In the same way, *auteur* director Andrei Tarkovskii became a hero of this alternative culture because of his appeal to predominantly dissident rather than official audiences. In *A History of Russian Cinema*, Birgit Beumers offers a compelling argument concerning the place of *auteur* directors in the sociocultural environment of the Stagnation period.

The last hopes for a liberalization of cultural politics were shattered with the trial of Andrei Siniavsky and Yuli Daniel, surrounded by massive protests and international campaigns that represented the first step towards the formation of the dissident underground movement, splitting society into ‘conformist’ and ‘dissident.’ The dissident voices in art adopted themes and styles that did not form part of mass culture, and rejected linearity in favour of structural experiments. Thus, a divide came about between *auteur* cinema, largely created by filmmakers who were classified as

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<sup>38</sup> The Russian title of Tarkovskii’s film is more aptly transliterated as “*Soliaris*.” However, because it is common practice (and a ubiquitous convention in the sources cited), I will refer to it as “*Solaris*.”

‘difficult’ or openly ‘dissident,’ and ‘movies for the masses,’ made by talented filmmakers using more conventional narratives (although often tackling controversial issues as well). This divide led to international interest in and recognition of the ‘difficult’ filmmakers, who paradoxically came to represent Soviet cinema abroad (Beumers 2009, 146).

Andrei Tarkovskii’s film adaptation of Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* was a success for a director whose previous film had been stalled for half a decade by the Soviet censors. In 1972, *Solaris* won the Grand Prix Spécial du Jury and was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (Cannes 2019). Although it premiered in limited theaters in the USSR in 1973, it was embraced by the Soviet intelligentsia and subsequently achieved cult status. Often cited as one of the greatest science fiction films in the history of cinema, the domestic and international success that *Solaris* enjoyed forced the Soviet leadership to acknowledge Tarkovskii’s artistic talent. (He was, after all, earning the government considerable income from the foreign distribution of his films). However, partially because the bureaucracy had chosen to castigate Tarkovskii by applying heavy-handed censorship to *Andrei Rublev*, and partially because of the apolitical themes characteristic of his oeuvre, the dissident intelligentsia sought to adopt this (technically) official director as their own. Unfortunately, on account of its perceived association with the movement that served to counter the bureaucracy’s mainstream ideology, *Solaris* served as the breaking point in Tarkovskii’s career as a Soviet director. From this point forward, he would suffer through a constant battle with a malicious bureaucracy that would handicap his career and ultimately force him into self-imposed exile.

Tarkovskii’s approach to filmmaking is unique among Soviet directors. His cinematic style, which features drawn-out scenes, close-up portraits, and dense symbolism, is notably

unconventional for post-Stalinist cinema. Furthermore, his method of storytelling, which is distinctly personal, clearly distinguishes his oeuvre from comparable works of Stagnation-era Soviet film.<sup>39</sup> Describing his approach to adapting Lem's novel, Tarkovskii makes a thought-provoking argument concerning the role of the *auteur* director as an artist.

The complexity in adapting *Solaris* is an issue of film adaptations in general and secondarily an issue of science-fiction adaptations. These are the two fundamental issues of my current work. The first issue relates to the principles of a work of literature in general. Prose possesses the special characteristic that its imagery depends on the sensory experience of the reader. . . . But what about cinema? Where in cinema does a viewer have this freedom of choice? . . . Cinema, in contrast to literature, is the filmmaker's experience caught on film. And if this personal experience is really sincerely expressed then the viewer accepts the film. I've noticed, from my own experience, if the external, emotional construction of images in a film are based on the filmmaker's own memory, on the kinship of one's personal experience with the fabric of the film, then the film will have the power to affect those who see it. If the director follows only the superficial, literal base of the film, for example the screenplay, even if in the most convincing, realist, and conscientious manner, the viewer will be left unaffected. Therefore, if you're objectively incapable of influencing a viewer with his own experience, as in literature as I mentioned earlier, and you're unable to achieve that in principle, then in cinema, you should sincerely talk about your own experience. That's why even now, when all half-literate people have learned to make movies, cinema remains an art form which only a small number of directors have actually mastered, and they can be counted with the fingers of one hand. To remold a literary work into the frames of a film means to tell your version of the literary source, framing it through yourself (Abramov 2006, 35).

Tarkovskii's approach to filmmaking is objectively individualistic. According to his theory, directors must reinvent source material through the lens of their own personal experience, rather than simply transfer the original into cinematic form. Moreover, while acknowledging that the conventions of literary genre are relevant to his *fantastika* adaptations, Tarkovskii insists that cinema is not defined by genre – that “cinema is *itself* a genre” (Lem 2006, 66). This

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<sup>39</sup> “Tarkovskian” has become a common label for films considered to be inspired by the director's unique style.



uncompromising approach to maintaining artistic agency, even in the context of adapting a living author's writing to film, is indicative of one of Tarkovskii's greatest strengths. As an intellectual schooled in Thaw-era individualism, Tarkovskii refused to allow the films that he made to lose his distinct personal touch. The extent to which he would go in order to achieve that aim is written in the history of his oppression by the Soviet bureaucracy: time after time, even in the face of considerable personal consequences, Tarkovskii stood up to the censors to prevent significant changes to his projects. This is unquestionably one of the reasons that the Soviet *auteur* director was censured and ultimately forsaken by the official culture of the Stagnation period. Undoubtedly, however, it is also a major basis for his popularity both among the dissident intelligentsia and within the international cinematic community.

Tarkovskii's approach to adapting *Solaris* is distinctly personal. However, the principal themes addressed in Lem's classic are also on display in Tarkovskii's adaptation. Thus, while Lem would later complain that the director took too much liberty with his work (Tighe 1990, 75), Tarkovskii's film exhibits a nuanced approach to many of the same personal, social, and philosophical themes developed in the original.

*Solaris* opens with the text of an interview transposed on the screen in black-and-white.

This dialogue may be viewed as a frame for the subsequent narrative:

Answer: . . . No, since man has destroyed social inequality and ended his preoccupation with war, science has achieved great successes. Nonetheless, you are mistaken to think that science is all-powerful.

Question: Is human understanding really limited?

Answer: I see that you desperately want to hear from me that which you should have learned in school. I will give you this pleasure: human understanding is infinite and limitless. But this does not mean that the problems over which we toil will be solved

this year, this decade, or even this century.

Question: But the experience of studying the universe shows. . .

Answer: It seems you know too much about the universe. /laughter in the hall/. If we knew so much, then we would have nothing to do in the cosmos.

Question: So, the unknown draws you into the cosmos?

Answer: Again, you misunderstand me. I am interested in man.

– From an interview with Professor K. Kelvin and the staff of the “Nashe Vremia” newspaper (Tarkovskii 1972).

This fictional interview introduces the protagonist and establishes Tarkovskii’s approach to the film’s subject. Professor Kris Kelvin claims that, while the human mind is infinite in its capabilities, scientific progress is a function of time and experience. Like Veda Kong in Ivan Efremov’s *Tumannost andromedy*, he suggests that the development of civilization depends on humankind’s understanding of its own distinct nature. Kelvin’s responses indicate both a pragmatic approach to progress and a skepticism of utopian idealism. When the interviewer attempts to push the conversation to questions of the universe, the hero insists that his primary interest is “man.”

This opening dialogue sets the stage for Tarkovskii to express a complex ideological message by approaching the film’s subject – the planet Solaris – from a humanist perspective. Like Lem’s *Solaris*, Tarkovskii’s adaptation is predominantly concerned with the individual and his personal relationship to the “other.” Just as Kelvin proposes in his interview, Tarkovskii’s approach to understanding the universe is rooted in the study of human beings themselves. Rather than developing the more fantastical aspects of Lem’s fictional planet, therefore, Tarkovskii places the individual at the forefront of the narrative. Thus, a dialogue is established concerning the nature of humankind and its relationship to the universe in the very first frames of

the film. Faithful to Lem's novel, Tarkovskii's *Solaris* is predominantly concerned with Kelvin and his personal relation to the unknown.

Perhaps surprisingly for a film about an alien planet, the first forty-five minutes of Tarkovskii's *Solaris* are set on Earth. Exemplifying the director's exquisite cinematic style, the opening scenes depict idyllic rural landscapes and untamed nature in exceptional detail. Lingering close-ups on Kelvin and other characters are interrupted by lengthy panoramas of the densely-wooded countryside. Water, in particular, appears to be a fairly ubiquitous symbol for the purity of nature: the film opens on a flowing river; Kelvin is shown washing his hands in a lake; a rainstorm catches the characters by surprise. Introducing an association between Earth's terrestrial phenomena and those of the planet Solaris, these scenes create a unique vision of nature in its splendid complexity.

In a countryside home, Kelvin, his father, and a man named Henry Berton discuss important news: a research station orbiting Solaris is experiencing major problems and in danger of crashing into the planet. They watch a recording of Berton's testimony before a panel of scientists in which he claims to have witnessed a four-meter-tall child and other conspicuous phenomena on the surface of the planet's ocean. In the video, his report is rejected outright by the scientific committee. Berton's peers demand that the mission to study Solaris be cancelled, claiming that their efforts to understand the celestial body are ultimately doomed to failure.

Kelvin and Berton have a conversation concerning the future of solaristics that ends in palpable feelings of enmity between them.

Kris: I have no right to carry out decisions based on emotional impulses. I am not a poet. I have a very concrete goal: either I will stop the research, take the station out of orbit and legitimize the deadlock in the crisis of solaristics, or, I suppose, I could take extreme measures. Maybe even bombard the ocean with heavy radiation.

Berton: Anything but that!

Kris: Why not? You yourself suggested that the research must be continued at any cost.

Berton: So what, you want to destroy that which we are currently unable to understand? I'm sorry, but I am not a supporter of obtaining knowledge at any price. Knowledge is only Truth when it is based on morality.

Kris: Man performs science both morally and immorally . . . remember Hiroshima?

Berton: Well then . . . don't do science immorally. Strange!

(Tarkovskii 1972)

Berton tells Kelvin that science must be done “morally,” and suggests that bombarding the planet with powerful radiation will endanger the prospect of future research. When Kelvin rejects this hypothesis, citing Hiroshima as proof that immoral science may also achieve great results, Berton walks away in anger.

In Kelvin's family home, a second television report presents a theory that Solaris is a conscious, sentient being. Introducing the scientists aboard the research vessel orbiting the planet, the report also details the state of the expedition: “Now on this colossal station, designed for eighty-five people, only three are working.” Based on this program and dialogue between the characters, it becomes apparent that Kelvin is the station's last hope for legitimization and salvation. Before departing, Kelvin overhears a conversation between his father and Henri Berton. In this conversation Berton reveals that, when visiting the widow of his deceased colleague, her son appeared to be an identical copy of the child he had seen on Solaris.

The final scenes set on Earth show Kelvin burning his personal belongings, including a picture of a woman later revealed to be his former wife. However, the most conspicuous

cinematography in this portion of the film takes place in a tangent that is seemingly disconnected from the primary narrative. In a series of shots filmed from a moving vehicle that lasts a full five minutes, Tarkovskii creates a portrait of a dense, sprawling urban highway. The camera moves through tunnels, over bridges, and between the bustling traffic – creating a feeling of movement and underlining an image of developed civilization. These lengthy shots of knotty urban roadways (filmed on a dense Japanese highway) serve as a contrast to the idyllic, rural landscapes presented in the opening scenes. In this way, Tarkovskii creates a juxtaposition between organized civilization and wild, unadulterated nature.

In addition to creating a parallel between nature and civilization, the scenes filmed from a moving vehicle also serve as a metaphor for Kelvin's flight through space. Unlike in Lem's *Solaris*, very little attention is paid to Kelvin's experience traveling to the station. Instead, this scene serves as a sort of pseudo-adventure: the camera's movement through serpentine tunnels and open concrete planes represents travel through time and space (or, perhaps, through black holes and vast emptiness). In a show of his artistic genius, Tarkovskii's Earth scenes weave together a multifaceted portrayal of man, nature, and civilization while setting the stage for an investigation into the complexities of the human mind.

When Kelvin arrives at the station orbiting Solaris, he finds both the ship and the crew in serious disorder. No one comes to greet the new arrival, and the halls of the vessel are littered with electrical components and exposed wires. The first person that Kelvin encounters, Doctor Snaut, exhibits extreme nervousness at his presence. Looking at Kelvin as if he were a ghost, Snaut informs him that one of their shipmates, Dr. Gibarian, has committed suicide. Kelvin is

struck by this news, having been friends with Gibarian for many years, but is even more perplexed by Snaut's behavior and ominous warning: "If you see something unusual, not me or Sartorius, try to keep yourself in hand" (Tarkovskii 1972).

After Snaut boorishly rushes him out of the room, Kelvin wanders the halls of the spacecraft until he finds an open bedroom. Leaving his belongings behind, he seeks out the office of his recently-deceased colleague. A crayon drawing of a person with the word "human" is posted on Gibarian's door, and the bedroom is in total disarray. On a hanging television screen, Kelvin finds a note addressed to himself. The screen begins to play a recorded message in which Gibarian makes a stunning confession: the Solarists circling the planet, frustrated at their inability to explain the function of its oceanic movements, bombarded Solaris with beams of heavy radiation in hopes of provoking an observable reaction. The consequence of this action is that the planet appears to have created a connection to the individual consciousness of each scientist in orbit. The primary way in which this connection manifests itself, according to the late doctor, is through hallucinated phantoms of individuals from the scientists' pasts. Visibly perturbed, Kelvin cuts the video short and leaves the room in search of the conspicuously absent Dr. Sartorius.

Finding Sartorius' room locked, Kelvin notices movement behind the door and demands to speak with whomever is inside. Sartorius is rude and dismissive to Kelvin. Wearing torn clothes and covered in dirt, he appears visibly distraught. During their conversation, in which Sartorius disrespects the late Gibarian, a little person bursts out of Sartorius' room and runs into the hallway. Sartorius, quickly carrying the man back into the bedroom, is berated by Kelvin for

his inhumanity concerning their deceased colleague. However, he promptly disappears behind the door, telling Kelvin to leave him alone and get accustomed to the station.

Staring out the window, Kelvin appears both enthralled and terrified by the ominous planet. There appears to be something mysterious about its oceanic movements and natural formations, but Kelvin is incapable of describing the cause of his unease when gazing on Solaris from the station. While lackadaisically glancing out the window, he catches sight of a woman walking behind him. Wearing a bracelet laced with bells, this unidentified specter leaves a trail of sound behind her conspicuously erratic movements. Following her into a refrigerated room, Kelvin finds the frozen body of Dr. Gibarian but no sign of the mysterious visitor. After an uninformative conversation with Snaut, Kelvin watches the remainder of Gibarian's video message. Taken aback, Kelvin recognizes a young girl in the background from a photo of Gibarian's family. Terrified by the video's implications, Kelvin takes a gun from Gibarian's room and barricades himself in his sleeping quarters.

As Kelvin slowly awakens, he is surprised to see a woman sitting in his room. This beautiful specter, an exact replica of the woman in the picture that Kelvin burned on Earth, kisses and caress Kelvin as if she were his lover. Kelvin is baffled by her unexpected appearance, but is also visibly mollified by her presence. In the following scene, the phantom finds a picture of Hari in Kelvin's bag. She recognizes herself, but is confused at her lack of memory. After asserting that Kelvin intends to ignore her "just like Snaut" (Tarkovsky 1972), Hari states that she loves him and must not leave his presence. Kelvin attempts to help Hari disrobe only to find that her clothes are seamless (the dress has no opening), and there is a needle mark on her exposed arm.

If not yet fully aware of Hari's exceptional nature, Kelvin is forced to come to terms with reality when faced with a tell-tale sign of his wife's violent suicide.

Looking at Tarkovskii's work from a structural perspective, it is interesting to note that this confusing and emotionally-loaded scene is immediately followed by a cinematic intermission. Unsurprisingly for a film with a runtime of (at least)<sup>40</sup> two hours and forty-five minutes, *Solaris* is divided into two approximately proportionate parts. However, Tarkovskii's choice to create a break at this crucial point in the narrative is indicative of his distinctive stylistic approach. Allowing the viewer time to ponder Kelvin's predicament and more thoroughly empathize with his feelings of loss, Tarkovskii uses a prudently placed intermission to create a powerful impression of the hero's complex personal relationship with the mysterious visitor.

Immediately following the intermission, Kelvin leads Hari into a rocket and fires it into space. Engrossed in his mission to rid himself of the phantom, the hero becomes trapped in the launch bay and is burned by the rocket's ignition. While recovering, Kelvin explains to Snaut that his wife, who died ten years earlier, committed suicide by injecting dangerous chemicals into her arm. Snaut, who appears unfazed by Kelvin's overreaction to the visitor's presence, describes the nature of the phantom and the reason for its presence aboard the Solarists' vessel.

It all started after we conducted experiments with x-rays. We affected the upper layer of the ocean with strong blasts of energy. . . . The ocean answered the violent radiation with some other kind of emission, which probed our minds and extracted from them something like islands of memory (Tarkovskii 1972).

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<sup>40</sup> Runtimes for different historical versions of Tarkovskii's *Solaris* range from 166 to 178 minutes,



Warning that Hari will likely return to the station at night, Snaut explains that she is a manifestation of Kelvin's memories embodied by an unknown force emanating from Solaris. The hero, embarrassed at his ill-considered conduct in dealing with this alien entity, accepts Snaut's explanation and returns to his bedroom to sleep.

During the night, Hari appears to Kelvin and warmly seeks his embrace. Apparently unaware of his previous betrayal, Hari gets in bed with the protagonist, kissing and caressing him as the camera gradually pans away. With a stylistic trick that has become ubiquitous in modern cinema, Tarkovskii leaves it to the viewer to speculate on the extent of their conjugal relations. Moreover, by showing a moment of physical intimacy between the hero and Hari's phantom, the director evokes empathy from his audiences concerning their romantic relationship.

The following morning, Kelvin walks out of his bedroom only to be shocked by an alarming sound. Hari, screaming and crying, violently attacks the door until she has broken through to the other side. Bleeding and covered in viscera, she loses consciousness as Kelvin desperately tries to save her. Returning a moment later with medical supplies, he is astonished to see that Hari's wounds have healed almost instantaneously. Now even more confused about the phantom's corporeal form, Kelvin decides to test her cognition by introducing her to his own personal history.

After watching a movie detailing scenes from Kelvin's life on Earth, Hari begins to express self-awareness concerning the duality of her nature. However, just as Kelvin struggles between his emotional and rational motivations, Hari is unable to disentangle her love for Kelvin from the logic of her exceptional existence. Thus, fully recognizing that she is not the same as

Kelvin's former wife, the phantom declares her love and demands to know why he abandoned her. When Kelvin reveals the truth of their former relationship – that he had witnessed Hari's spiral into depression, driven her out of his life, and even inadvertently supplied her with a needle full of poison – the specter becomes visibly upset. At least partially developed both emotionally and rationally, she exhibits a reaction that is conspicuously similar to that of the protagonist: frustrated with an inability to understand the unknown, Hari leans on (seemingly unfounded) feelings of connection with Kelvin for comfort and support. Just as in Lem's classic, Tarkovskii's *Solaris* creates a complex ethical dilemma and complicates it with emotional and psychological weight. The pathos on display in the relationship between Hari and Kelvin, as well as in the relationship between each of these characters and their respective selves, paints an exceptional mosaic on the nature of humankind and its approach to knowledge. As a credit to the director, *Solaris*' narrative style creates an almost indescribable feeling of haziness and "otherness" as the film progresses.

In a conversation between Kelvin, Sartorius, and Snaut, Hari delivers a moving speech concerning their respective approaches to interacting with the unexpected visitors.

But it seems to me that Kris Kelvin is more consistent than either of you. In inhuman circumstances he conducted himself humanely. You pretend as if none of this concerns you and consider your guests, as it seems you have labeled us, something external, obstructive. But it is you yourselves, it is your consciences. And Kris loves me . . . or maybe it's not that he loves me, but that he is protecting himself from himself. True! That he wants to be with me, alive . . . that is not the point. It doesn't matter why a person loves, everyone does it differently. It isn't Kris, he didn't do anything wrong. It is you! I hate all of you! (Tarkovskii 1972)

With this sentimental monologue, Hari offers an outside perspective on the Solarists' irregular experiences. Claiming that Sartorius and Snaut are too indifferent in dealing with their own phantoms, she praises Kelvin for embracing his emotions and approaching her with love and compassion. Furthermore, when Sartorius interrupts this monologue – insisting that she is not human and nothing but an illegitimate “copy” – Hari offers a convincing refutation of this point of view.

Hari: Yes! Perhaps! But I, I am becoming a person. And I feel that I am no less than you, believe me. I can already manage without him. I, I love him. I am a person. You, you are very cruel (ibid.).

Hari's insistence that she is a person is itself evidence of her sentience and capacity for rational cognition. Moreover, although the Solarists may not wish to recognize her as a human being, Hari expresses a distinctly humanistic worldview. In a poignant commentary on a topic approached in both Ivan Efremov's *Tumannost' andromedy* and Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, Tarkovskii's heroine eloquently declares that love must be the foundation for true understanding. This gives credence to historian David Gillespie's argument that “*Solaris* is Tarkovskii's warning of the dangers for humanity when contact between individuals breaks down” (Gillespie 2003, 174).

Kelvin repeatedly expresses his feelings for Hari as their relationship matures, but she constantly accuses him of being dishonest. Shortly after the revelation concerning her increased agency, Kelvin finds Hari dead on the floor of the hallway. He declares to Snaut that she killed herself out of despair, but insists that he intends to wait for her reincarnation. Unmoved, Snaut warns Kelvin that the apparition's putative “humanness” may put him in danger. Hari, violently

awakening from her self-inflicted death, takes hold of Kelvin and again challenges his love. In an emotional plea to convince her that his feelings are genuine, Kelvin declares that he loves Hari despite her connection to the mystifying planet. Insisting that he will remain on the station to be with her, he embraces the revived phantom until she becomes peacefully still.

All of the footage following this emotional scene is presented in the form of a feverish dream. Kelvin becomes sick, struggling through rambling monologues on the topic of love before being carried to bed by Snaut and the phantom. Thereafter, the hero experiences an incongruous series of dreams involving his mother, a multiplicity of Haris, and his rural family home. Domestic scenes with conspicuously accented water vases are interspersed with images of Solaris' oceanic movements, re-enforcing a connection between nature, civilization, and the "other." During these final scenes, Kelvin appears to gain consciousness on multiple occasions, but it is clear from the incongruity of the narrative that he never fully awakens. Thus, when Snaut informs him that the Solarists have found a way to eliminate the phantoms, Kelvin insists that he will remain on the vessel to wait for "new miracles." Following this final conversation aboard the spacecraft, Kelvin relapses into a dream-like state and has a vision of his rural home. In the final shots of the film, Tarkovskii reintroduces the images of nature displayed at the beginning of the film, including a river, lake, and rain. Peering into his home on a relatively cloudless day, Kelvin witnesses a deluge falling on his father inside. In a deft application of camerawork, a slow pan-out over Kelvin's family home gradually reveals that this pristine rural paradise is but an island in the ocean of Solaris' endless surface.

Andrei Tarkovskii's *Solaris* is a highly original interpretation of Stanislaw Lem's *fantastika* classic. While addressing many of the same themes featured in the original, Tarkovskii approaches personal, social, and philosophical issues from a unique perspective. Expanding on the storyline and some of the novel's principal ideas, the director maintains authorial integrity by developing wholly innovative cinematic tangents. Thus, scenes of water and life are juxtaposed with images of Solaris and its magnificent oceanic movements; footage of a snaking urban road serves as a metaphor for travel through the depths of the cosmos; and questions of cognition are approached from both human and "alien" perspectives. However, whereas Tarkovskii displays enviable artistic talent in distinguishing his work from its source material stylistically, the primary ideological message is essentially the same. Like Lem's *Solaris*, Tarkovskii's adaptation posits that the key to overcoming the limits of human understanding is an approach that is based in individual morality, social responsibility, and love.

The Solarists' dismissive and fearful approach to their unexpected visitors may be viewed as a fear of coming to terms with oneself. Hari is a constant reminder of Kelvin's failures, and his attempts to get rid of her indicate an unwillingness to face his past. Snaut and Sartorius treat their visitors as something inhuman and hide them from one another – suggesting that they too represent past trauma. Thus, if we view *Solaris* as an allegory for post-Stalinist culture, one might say that Tarkovskii views coming to terms with the past as central to the creation of a new narrative of Soviet identity. Instead of hiding or dismissing the negative aspects of Soviet history, Tarkovskii advocates that society should embrace them with understanding and love. Hari's statement that "in inhumane circumstances (Kelvin) acted humanely" underscores the

film's primary message: in order to gain a better understanding of our universe, we must first learn to love and understand ourselves.

Another interpretation of Tarkovskii's message may be viewed through the lens of Chaadaev's theory concerning a fundamental separation between Russian culture and that of other developed nations. If, as Chaadaev asserted, Russians are part of a unique (albeit, inferior) civilization, then *Solaris* posits that a loving and open-minded approach to the "other" (e.g. countries, peoples, ideologies) is crucial to the development of that civilization. Snaut, Sartorius, and the scientific committee – all of whom refuse to approach the specters as human – highlight negative aspects of isolationist ideology. The committee, in the face of Berton's reports on strange events on *Solaris*, advocate for canceling the mission and ignoring the planet completely: embracing fear over a connection with the unknown. Sartorius is ashamed of his specter (i.e. his own personal connection to the unknown), and constantly reminds Kelvin that a relationship with Hari will breed disaster. Snaut is responsible for bombarding the planet with energy – literally attacking the "other" to provoke a reaction – and, consequently, causing the appearance of the specters. However, even though he is fully aware that they are manifestations of the planet's sophisticated cognition, he treats the specters with disdain and disregard. In the end, Snaut and Sartorius develop a way to eliminate the hallucinations through technology – again choosing isolation over a connection with the unknown.

Kelvin himself goes through several transitions on his path to ultimately embracing the "other." After all, before traveling to *Solaris* Kelvin advocates for bombarding *Solaris* with energy (an attack) and, when confronted with the reality of Hari's dual nature, he fires her off

into space (a rejection). It is only through recognizing the similarities between himself and the specter (an acceptance) that he finally comes to a deeper understanding of the unknown. He sees in her a definite yet indefinable quality of “humanness” – common ground from which to conduct meaningful communication. Thus, if Kelvin may be considered an agent for expressing Tarkovskii’s perspective, and the other Solarists as symbols for inappropriate approaches to the unknown, *Solaris* may be viewed as a direct challenge to Stalinist (or, for that matter, Brezhnev-era) isolationism. Like Efremov’s *Tumannost’ andromedy* and Lem’s *Solaris*, the message of Tarkovskii’s work in the context of the “us” versus “them” paradigm is one of openness and panhumanism.

*Solaris* is a *fantastika* film that was able to express a predominantly apolitical message in the comparatively conservative sociocultural environment of the Stagnation period. Especially in comparison to the two-part television adaptation of *Solaris* (Boris Niremburg 1968), which is focused on the technical aspects of Lem’s fictional planet and characterized by flat, undeveloped characters, Tarkovskii’s film is distinctly individualistic and humanistic. This *auteur* director’s artistic adaptation combines the novel’s focus on personal, social, and philosophical issues with an intricate pastiche of symbols and metaphors. Playing with structure in a way unpracticed since the fall of the Formalist filmmakers in the late 1920s, Tarkovskii’s narrative is framed in a design that is stylistically exceptional. Moreover, unlike similar works of *auteur* cinema that were produced during the Stagnation, including the film that will serve as the subject for my next discussion (Tarkovskii’s *Stalker*), *Solaris* escaped relatively unscathed from the powerful jaws of the Soviet censorship apparatus.

As a work that features intricate psychological portraits and presents a message based on individual values and ethical relationships, *Solaris* was embraced by the Soviet intelligentsia and the tangentially-related dissident movement. However, as I stated previously, a consequence of the film's popularity among members of the underground counterculture was a major crackdown on Tarkovskii's subsequent projects. Thus, even if one were to (mistakenly) argue that *Solaris* is a typical example of Stagnation-era cinema, the unprovoked attack on Tarkovskii's later artistic production indicates that the bureaucracy was intolerant of some of the ideas that audiences adopted from his film.

In the following section, I will provide an analysis of Tarkovskii's *Stalker* in the context of Stagnation-era sociocultural history. Through an analysis of this *auteur* adaptation and the novella by Boris and Arkadii Strugatskii upon which it is based, I will show how Tarkovskii continued to succeed in expressing humanistic and apolitical ideological messages even under increased scrutiny from Soviet censors. In doing so, I will provide further support for my primary argument: although the Stagnation witnessed a crackdown on social, artistic, and individual freedoms, the liberal ideological trends established during the Thaw continued to have a salient presence in the *auteur fantastika* cinema of the following period. As a reflection of Soviet identity during the Stagnation period, therefore, the ideological message of *Solaris* may be viewed as a reflection of the worldview shared by a culturally significant segment of society. Soviet dissidents, schooled in the humanist and individualist principles of Khrushchev's Thaw, embraced Tarkovskii's film as a fitting expression of their identity.



## The Strugatskii Brothers and *Piknik na obochine*

Few figures were as prominent as the Strugatskiis in the literature of the 1960s and 1970s. For both literary and cinematic audiences, the Strugatskiis' books and Tarkovsky's films immediately registered as out-of-the-ordinary events, a breath of pure oxygen, subjects for discussion and debates. By this time the so-called Thaw in Soviet culture had effectively ceased to exist (Tsymbal and Maguire 2015, 256).

It is difficult to overestimate Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii's role in the development of the late-Soviet and post-Soviet worldview. Viacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov counted them "among the most frequently read and most frequently published writers of the last half-century" (Ivanov 2011, 7), and Stanislaw Lem considered them the only authors in the Soviet *fantastika* tradition worthy of true acknowledgement (Borisov 2006, 321). From the start of their collaboration in 1959 to Arkadii's death in 1991, the brothers produced over a hundred short stories, novellas, novels, translations, and screenplays in the *fantastika* genre alone (Strugatskii 2002). Approaching a variety of subjects and themes previously unexplored in either Soviet or Western science fiction, their dynamically innovative writing established the duo as a major voice in the Soviet (and, subsequently, post-Soviet) sociocultural space (Barron 1995, 434). Thus, although faced with considerable pressure from the censors during the Stagnation period, many of their texts were eventually adapted into films, television series, video games, plays, and other media. As a testament to their popularity, between 1979 and 2013 over a dozen Russian-language feature films were produced based on their writing (approximately one every three years). In my study of the Soviet worldview and Russian national identity in the post-Stalinist and post-Soviet periods, I analyze five *fantastika* film adaptations inspired by the Strugatskiis'

oeuvre. In order to create a more concrete impression of the sociocultural environment characteristic of the Stagnation period, however, this section will focus primarily on their 1972 novella *Piknik na obochine*.

A significant portion of the Strugatskiis' writing was left unpublished until after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, much of the material that succeeded in passing through censorship was subject to thorough ideological oversight and revision (McGuire 1985, 70 and Strugatskii 2003, 181). Particularly during the 1970s, censors consistently sought to limit the expression of the brothers' ideas, regularly attempting to coerce them into reworking their texts in a more politically orthodox vein. However, like *auteur* director Andrei Tarkovskii, Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii refused to significantly alter their messages to appease the Soviet leadership. As characteristic members of the *shestidesiatniki*, they approached writing from an individualistic perspective, refusing to relinquish the liberties gained during the Thaw and placing a high value on artistic agency.

As a consequence of official censure, the Strugatskiis often prepared manuscripts "for the desk drawer," hoping a more suitable environment for publication would arise in the future. Consequently, a significant number of their works were introduced to readers through the underground network known as "*samizdat*." Describing the function of *samizdat* and its place in the sociocultural environment of the Stagnation period, historian Ludmilla Alexeyeva notes:

There has always existed a more or less harsh system of censorship. In response, since the time of Aleksandr Radishchev in the eighteenth century, censored works have been passed down from hand to hand. But *samizdat* is unique as a *mass* phenomenon and

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<sup>41</sup> For more precise information on which works were refused publication, see Boris Strugatskii's *Kommentarii k proidennomu* (Strugatskii 2003).

as the *basic* means of self-knowledge and self-expression accessible to society in the post-Stalinist Era of the Soviet Union. The mechanism of *samizdat* is very simple: the author types his work on a typewriter . . . photocopies it, and passes copies out to people he knows. If others are interested in the work, they make copies from their copy and distribute them among their friends. The more successful a work, the faster and further it is distributed. Of course, *samizdat* is extremely inefficient in terms of time and effort expended, but it is the only possible way of overcoming the government monopoly on ideas and information. It has attracted talented writers, fearless and energetic distributors, and a readership that is continually growing. Those who hunger for a truthful picture of the world and for genuine knowledge are prepared to sacrifice time and energy and even endure persecution for its sake (Alexeyeva 1985, 12).

A major pillar of post-Stalinist dissident culture, *samizdat* was a medium for expressing ideas too radical to appear in official publications. The audience for these illegal materials, predominantly members of the dissident intelligentsia, was willing to expend significant effort and risk serious consequences in order to have access to them. Critically, *samizdat* gave writers frustrated with the conservative Soviet censorship apparatus a way to express their ideas to a limited audience. Thus, when a work by a popular contemporary author was rejected or withheld by the bureaucracy, it was not uncommon for it to appear circulating in *samizdat* within a short period of time. Such was the case for the Strugatskiis' 1967 novel *Gadkie lebedi*, which, although scheduled for publication in 1968 (Potts 1991, 71), ultimately circulated exclusively in *samizdat* until 1990.<sup>42</sup> It was also the case for *Ulitka na sklone* (1968) and *Skazka o troike* (1968), both of which were published only in obscure Siberian magazines before being withdrawn from circulation on ideological grounds (Simon 2004, 387). In the latter example, *samizdat* copies of the original publications spread extensively in dissident circles – so much so that references to

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<sup>42</sup> Shortened and edited versions of *Gadkie lebedi* were first serialized in the journals *Izobretatel' i ratsionalizator* (No. 9 and 10, 1986) and *Daugava* (No. 1-7, 1987) under the names *Prekrasnyi utenok* and *Vremia dozhdia* respectively. The full text of *Gadkie lebedi* was first published in *Sbornik nauchnoi fantastiki* (issue 34) in 1990.

them continued in official publications for years after they were “erased” from the Soviet literary landscape. Therefore, when examining the Strugatskiis’ oeuvre in the context of Stagnation-era sociocultural history, it is crucial to recognize that these brothers were perceived as representative examples of the dissident intelligentsia (no matter how much they have publicly rejected that label in the past). Finding an audience for their most controversial writings almost exclusively among the Soviet intellectual elite, these authors came to be associated with the unofficial underground culture of the Stagnation period on account of both their humanistic ideological messages and their persecution by the Soviet bureaucracy.

The publication history of *Piknik na obochine* illustrates the role of both *samizdat* and censorship in the sociocultural production of the Stagnation period. Like *Skazka o troike* and *Ulitka na sklone* in 1968, *Piknik na obochine* was published in 1972 with relatively little interference from the bureaucracy. According to the younger of the two brothers,

It is remarkable that *Piknik*, relatively easily and without any significant problems, was accepted for publication in Leningrad’s *Aurora*. . . . It was necessary, of course, to purge the manuscript of things like “shit” and “son of a bitch” – these were all familiar trivialities that an author finds charming – but not one of the authors’ principal positions was conceded, and the journal variant appeared at the end of the summer of 1972 almost unmutated (Strugatskii 2003, 208).

Apparently accustomed to the overt censorship of their writing by this point, Boris Strugatskii indicates that the decision to allow the publication of *Piknik na obochine* in the journal “*Aurora*” came as a great surprise. This is certainly understandable: in the same year, *Gadkie lebedi* (banned by Soviet censors) was published in West Germany and smuggled into the Soviet Union, causing an uproar within the party apparatus (McGuire 1985, 74). Furthermore, the fact

that the censors had allowed the novella to be printed with relatively minor revisions seemed abnormal to the Strugatskiis. Especially considering their previous treatment by the bureaucracy, the brothers rightfully suspected that the approval of *Piknik na obochine* was incongruent with the approach to cultural production that had been adopted by the Communist Party under Brezhnev.

Viewing the response to the serialization of their novella cautiously, the Strugatskiis set out to convince the censors to print *Piknik na obochine* as part of a collection entitled *Nenaznachennye vstrechi*. An agreement was made in 1973 to print 15,000 copies of this collection – a rather limited run considering the Strugatskiis’ popularity – but it was subsequently revoked in the following year (Skalandis 2008, 437). Thereafter, other arrangements were made for its publication, but these were also permanently stalled by the bureaucracy. Even following the premier of Andrei Tarkovskii’s internationally-acclaimed film adaptation in 1979, censors continued to balk at the idea of republishing *Piknik na obochine* in unredacted form (ibid.). As a compromise, in 1980 the authorities agreed to publish *Nenaznachennye vstrechi* if the brothers would make marginal revisions to *Piknik na obochine*. Frustrated with over seven years of battling for approval to publish their novella, the Strugatskiis agreed to make (what they considered minor) changes to appease the censors (Strugatskii 2003, 221). However, it was not until four years later, just as the Stagnation period was coming to a

close, that the brothers finally succeeded in republishing the journal edition of their novella in a collection based on *Nenaznachennye vstrechi* (Strugatskii 2006, 310).<sup>43</sup>

The publication history of *Piknik na obochine* underlines the struggle that many Soviet authors faced during the Stagnation period. Initially approved for publication with little oversight in a prominent literary journal, *Piknik na obochine* was subsequently treated with contempt and fear by the same bureaucracy that supported its original release. A work that became so popular that it was eventually published in over fifty-five editions in twenty-two countries, it was refused publication by the Soviet leadership for years after appearing in translation in the West (Strugatskii 2003, 221). Thus, aside from its original serialized publication in *Aurora* and one other journal in 1972, the Strugatskii brothers' *Piknik na obochine* circulated exclusively in *samizdat* for over a decade in the Soviet Union. The fact that this “unpublishable” novella became the basis for a film adaptation by an award-winning Soviet director in 1979, therefore, illustrates the profound influence that *samizdat* had on the sociocultural environment of the Stagnation period.

Like Tarkovskii's *Solaris*, *Piknik na obochine* opens with a fictional interview. Doctor Valentine Pilman, a renowned Canadian scientist, is questioned by a special correspondent for Harmont Radio about his groundbreaking theory and research on mysterious alien visitation zones. The doctor describes the theory that has come to be known as the “Pilman Radiant” thusly:

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<sup>43</sup> A detailed comparison of the redacted variant and the journal variant is given in *Neizvestnie Strugatskie* (Strugatskii 2006).

The Pilman Radiant is simplicity itself. Imagine that you spin a huge globe and you start firing bullets into it. The bullet holes would lie on the surface in a smooth curve. The whole point of what you call my first serious discovery lies in the simple fact that all six Visitation Zones are situated on the surface of our planet as though someone had taken six shots at Earth from a pistol located somewhere along the Earth-Deneb line. Deneb is the alpha star in Cygnus. The Point in the heavens from which, so to speak, the shots came is the Pilman Radiant (Strugatskii 1977, 2).

As Pilman goes on to describe the theory's origins, it is revealed that his hometown (Harmont, Canada) is one of six "zones" visited by extraterrestrials on Earth. When asked by the correspondent if he worried about Harmont following its invasion by "a supercivilization from space," the doctor declares that he was discouraged from returning by a dishonest press.

P: Not really. You see, by then I had come to believe in the Visitation, but I simply could not force myself to believe the hysterical reports about burning neighborhoods and monsters that selectively devoured only old men and children and about bloody battles between the invulnerable invaders and the highly vulnerable but steadfastly courageous Royal Tank Units.

C: You were right. I remember that our reporters really botched the story. (ibid.).

Pilman was dissuaded from researching the zone in Harmont because of false stories proliferated in the news. Claiming to be interested in studying alien artifacts in the future, he explains that the government has limited the public's access to information in order to ensure that the "extraterrestrial marvels found in the zones come into the hands of the International Institute" (ibid.).

Framing a criticism of secretive regimes and propaganda in a narrative set in Canada, the Strugatskiis create a recognizable parallel to oppressive policies historically practiced by Soviet (and Russian) leaders. The International Institute is a thin façade for a secret government agency bent on hiding the zone's phenomena from the public. By including a criticism of the fraudulent

narrative spread by Western journalists on behalf of the UN, the brothers draw attention to the politically controlled and censored Soviet press. If, as critics have theorized, *Piknik na obochine* may be viewed as a prophecy of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl' in 1986 (Ivanov 2011, 19), then this portrayal of an event covered up and surrounded in mystery by a self-interested authority is a truly salient parallel.

According to Dr. Pilman, the United Nations' "International Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures" (IIEC), of which he is a prominent member, has ultimately produced little of value in the aftermath of the visitation.

The fact of the Visitation itself is the most important discovery not only of the past thirty<sup>44</sup> years but of the entire history of mankind. It's not so important to know just who these visitors were. It's not important to know where they came from, why they came, why they spent so little time here, or where they've disappeared to since. The important thing is that humanity now knows for sure: we are not alone in the universe. I fear that the Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures will never be fortunate enough to make a more fundamental discovery (Strugatskii 1977, 3).

Following the direction established by Ivan Efremov in *Tumannost' andromedy*, Tarkovskii places Earth on a broad and uneven playing field of intergalactic civilization. In *Piknik na obochine*, humanity is faced with incontrovertible evidence of the existence of an intelligent and superior alien race. Moreover, the scientists in *Piknik na obochine* are incapable of interacting with the "other" directly. Instead, the people of Earth are forced to deal with the consequences of fantastic and powerful artifacts casually left behind like trash after a roadside picnic.

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<sup>44</sup> Antonina W. Bouis' popular translation features an error here. In the Strugatskiis' original text, the visitation took place thirteen (*trinadtsat'*) years prior to the interview instead of thirty (*tridsat'*).



The final and most important feature of Dr. Pilman's interview is the introduction of the so-called "Stalkers": individuals who seek to challenge the Institute's monopoly on alien artifacts by illegally navigating the zones in search of objects to sell for profit. These Stalkers, who are the primary subject of the subsequent narrative, regularly risk their lives in order to obtain precious objects. If this doesn't ring a bell, it certainly should. In fact, the Strugatskiis' Stalkers are an obvious parallel to the dissident intelligentsia. Spreading both the positive and negative effects of their profession to family and friends, these members of an illegal fringe society seek answers to questions left unaddressed by "official" voices. Willing to risk everything and face the unknown to provide for their families, they disseminate alien artifacts just as members of the Soviet *samizdat* community spread controversial ideas (although, in the case of the Stalkers, they do so for money).<sup>45</sup> This parallel between the Stalkers and Soviet dissidents is maintained throughout the novella and solidified in the final lines of the opening interview. When asked if he is compelled to unmask the mysteries of the zone personally, Dr. Pilman responds – "How can I put it. I suppose so" (Strugatskii 1977, 3). Thus, just as many intellectuals were tempted to experiment with dissident culture during the post-Stalinist period, the educated doctor implies that he is empathetic with the criminals who seek to bring light to the visitation's most closely-guarded secrets.

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<sup>45</sup> I would argue that the Strugatskiis' depiction of the Stalkers as capitalist opportunists is merely an attempt to appease the censors. The story is almost exclusively about the Stalkers, who represent a threat to the government and established order by spreading new ideas. It would likely have been difficult to conduct a work through censorship that glorified anti-government conduct. Thus, the Strugatskiis placed the most negative conceivable label on the Stalkers (i.e. capitalist) in attempt to superficially mark them as villains.

Part 1 of *Piknik na obochine* begins with the header: “1. Redrick Shukhart, Age 23, Bachelor, Laboratory Assistant at the Harmont Branch of the International Institute for Extraterrestrial Cultures.” In the opening paragraph, we are introduced to the protagonist through a colloquial interior monologue:

The night before, he and I were in the repository – it was already evening, all I had to do was throw off my lab suit and I could head for the Borscht to put a drop or two of the stiff stuff into my system. I was just standing there, holding up the wall, my work all done and a cigarette in my hand. I was dying for a smoke – it was two hours since I’d had one, and he was still puttering around with his stuff. He had loaded, locked, and sealed one safe and was loading up the other one – taking the empties from the transporter, examining each one from every angle (and they’re heavy little bastards, by the way, fifteen pounds each), and carefully replacing them on the shelf (Strugatskii 1977, 5).

Red’s obvious predisposition to alcoholism and low-register vernacular mark him as an uncivilized boor. However, attention is immediately drawn to his knowledge concerning alien artifacts. Admitting that he doesn’t understand the objects from a theoretical point of view, Red is able to describe the so-called “empties” in effective visual detail: “they’re just two copper disks the size of a saucer – about a quarter inch thick, with a space of a foot and a half between” (ibid.) Thus, while eschewing a scientific approach to the zone’s phenomena, Red appears to be capable of conceptualizing them quite clearly.

Immersed in a first-person narrative, readers are repeatedly challenged to reevaluate their relationship to the Stalker – a seemingly low-class, everyman protagonist. Red regularly acts and speaks in a way that is repulsive and barbaric, but he also approaches the world from a pragmatic and relatable perspective. Red reacts to his environment as a skilled and weathered survivor: he is a boor and a criminal, but he is also highly empathetic.

In a conversation between Red and his colleague Kirill, we learn that the protagonist has a vast store of knowledge concerning the zone's territory and phenomena. Intrigued by Red's description of a "full empty," Kirill decides to seek official approval for a mission to obtain one. The following day, however, Red is called to meet the Chief of Security and scolded for his alleged involvement in illegal activities. Outwardly apologetic toward this authority figure, Red internally fumes over the possibility that one of his fellow Stalkers has betrayed him. Reluctant to participate in the scientific expedition, Red ultimately agrees to accompany Kirill into the zone after the latter fabricates an official order to carry out the search.

Entering dangerous territory, Red constantly criticizes his fellow scientists as greenhorns to the zone. He points out their nervousness and lack of training, as well as their naivety and incaution. For his part, Red exhibits admirable tact in navigating the zone's dangerous phenomena: he guides a motorized cart through safe zones, throws rocks to mark paths around deadly magnetic fields, and is aware of such threats as "mosquito mange," the "silver spider web," and "witches jelly." While searching for the artifact, Red witnesses Kirill interact with the silver spider web. At first terrified of the inevitable consequences, Red calmly returns to the laboratory after a successful mission and collects bonus pay for his efforts. Kirill, extremely pleased with the new artifact and ignorant of his contact with the web, offers to name his future theory on the full empty after Red.

The remaining portion of Part 1 revolves around Red's interactions with people in his hometown. Many of these individuals may be viewed as representations of stereotypical character types in post-Stalinist Soviet society. Especially if we approach the phenomena in the

zone as *ideas* instead of *objects*, it is easy to recognize parallels between these characters and representative figures of Stagnation-era society. Let us consider, therefore, some of the traits exhibited by these characters against the background of theoretical post-Stalinist “types,” proceeding chronologically.

#### 1. The Intellectual Idealist:

Kirill is a dedicated and high-minded intellectual. As a scientist approaching the zone through official channels, his primary aspiration is to make a discovery that will benefit all of humankind. Moreover, while he prefers to study the artifacts in the confines of state-sanctioned research, he is not opposed to acting illegally in order to gain access to the zone’s secrets. According to literary theorist Carl Malmgren, this character “sees in the wonders of the zone the possibility of knowledge which can bring about a new world, a utopian world of plenty” (Malmgren 1991, 113).

Kirill is a symbol for the Thaw-era intellectuals that sought to reform the Soviet system from within by legally introducing ideas from dissident culture into the mainstream. A fitting example of this character type is Aleksandr Tvardovskii, the editor of the journal *Novy mir*, who convinced Khrushchev to allow the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in 1961 (Lakshin 1980, 4). The fact that Kirill ultimately dies from his interaction with the silver spider web, one might argue, could be considered an allusion to Tvardovskii’s sacking by the Soviet leadership in 1970 (or a variety of similar circumstances). Affected by one of the *ideas* of the zone, Kirill becomes an innocent victim in the war over

information. Critically, this character is the only individual whose approach to the zone Red appears to appreciate.

## 2. The (Former) Oppressor:

Captain Quarterblad is the police officer responsible for Red's prior arrest and incarceration for stalking. At first angered by the latter's presence near the zone, Quarterblad is visibly pleased that Red seems to have abandoned his life of crime in favor of honest labor. Representing the physical arm of the bureaucracy, Quarterblad is a symbol of Red's former oppression as well as a reminder of the dangers of illegally interacting with the zone.

## 3. The Corrupt Opportunist:

Ernest is a bar owner and the primary customer for the zone's illegal wares. He is friendly and appears to be a legitimate businessman, but secretly exploits both the Stalkers and his customers. According to Red, Ernest's primary character flaw is that he is an opportunist:

So, I thought. That Ernest really was a bastard. Not a drop of pity in him. Here's this young guy – tan, and clean, and pretty. Hasn't ever shaved or kissed a girl. But Ernest doesn't care. He just wants to send more people into the Zone. One out of three will come back with swag, and that's money for him (Strugatskii 1977, 35).

Ernest takes advantage of the demand for artifacts in order to enrich himself personally, disregarding ethics in favor of profits. Moreover, he works with the police when advantageous in order to legitimize his operation. As an example of a corrupt opportunist, Ernest represents members of Soviet society that sought to maintain a relationship with both official and unofficial cultures for personal gain. Perhaps the fullest embodiment of an ideological capitalist in the

Strugatskiis' novella, Ernest reminds one of the shady black-market dealers that peddled their wares at exorbitant prices to the *stiliagi* fashion counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.

#### 4. The Conservative Revisionist:

The Conservative Revisionist (Gutalin) and Enlightened Spy (Noonan) appear simultaneously:

Richard Noonan and Gutalin crashed into the hospitable arms of the bar. Gutalin was blotto, rolling his eyes and looking for a place to rest his fist. Richard Noonan was tenderly holding him by the elbow and distracting him with jokes. A pretty pair! Gutalin is a huge black ape with knuckles down to his knees, and Dick is a small round pink creature that all but glows (Strugatskii 1977, 31).

Gutalin believes that all of the items in the zone should either be destroyed or permanently kept out of human reach. Terrified by the new ideas introduced by the zone's sudden appearance, he organizes groups of volunteers to buy up items and destroy them (or, if they prove indestructible, return them to the dangerous zone). Gutalin represents the official culture that sought to eliminate the liberal current in Soviet society in the aftermath of the Thaw (Malmgren 1991, 114). Returning artifacts to the government-monitored zone and attempting to destroy all trace of their existence, the Revisionist Conservative ventures to conceal the alien phenomena from the public eye and has no interest in interacting with them himself.

#### 5. The Enlightened Spy:

Dr. Richard Noonan is a high-ranking employee of the government-controlled International Institute and an experienced Stalker hunter. He regularly attempts to trick Red into admitting to illegal activities, but also appears to be aware of the historical importance of the visitation and alien phenomena. He is enlightened about the visitation, understanding that the alien artifacts represent an important breakthrough in humanity's understanding of the universe,

yet he zealously embraces his oppressive occupation. Noonan appears to be a symbol for one primary group: the Soviet secret police. Limiting the public's access to secrets maintained by the state, his primary job is stemming the flow of illegal ideas out of the Harmont zone. He is in charge of a bureaucracy that seeks to maintain a monopoly on the items ("ideas") and punishes those who would seek to disseminate them. A fuller study of Noonan follows in my analysis of Part 3, where he plays a dominant role.

#### 6. The Long-Suffering Wife:

Guta is dedicated to Red. Knowing that her partner has a criminal record, a penchant for gambling, and a terrible drinking problem, she continues to support him even when treated with disrespect and contempt. Discovering that she is pregnant with Red's child, Guta hysterically swears that she will not comply with her mother's demand to have it aborted.

She keeps telling me that a baby by a stalker will be a freak, that you're a wanderer, that we'll have no real family. Today you're free, tomorrow you're in jail. But I don't care, I'm ready for anything. I can do it alone. I'll have him alone, I'll raise him alone, and make him into a man alone. I can manage without you, too. But don't you come around to me anymore. I won't let you through the door (Strugatskii 1977, 39).

Red's actions indicate a powerful emotional connection to Guta. When she comes to him in tears, Red embraces her and, as is revealed in the next chapter, asks her to marry him. Guta represents the women who supported their dissident spouses under the oppressive conditions of the Stagnation period. She is long-suffering and unconditionally devoted to family, but she is also aware that her fate is tied to the illegal craft practiced by her husband. Unfortunately, as a

symbolic representation of roughly half of the dissident population, Guta is painted as a static and relatively one-dimensional character.<sup>46</sup>

## 7. The Hope for the Future:

Monkey, Guta and Red's daughter, is not formally introduced in Part 1. However, a study of her character as it is presented in the narrative as a whole may help to illustrate my theory concerning the Strugatskiis' character types. Monkey, born fourteen years after the alien visitation, is a symbol for the generation raised during the Stagnation period. Because of unknown forces associated with the zone, she is directly affected by Red's occupation in the form of mutated genes. She grows thick hair that covers her body (hence the moniker) and, as the novel progresses, slowly loses the ability to speak. Therefore, if we view *Piknik na obochine's* visitation as a metaphor for the Thaw, Monkey may be seen as a symbol for the youth of the Stagnation period. Her communication disorder, in part caused by the actions of her dissident father, may be viewed as commentary on a perceived decline in freedom of expression among the younger generation.

Part 2 bears the following heading: "2. Redrick Shukhart, Age 28, Married, No Permanent Occupation." Red is five years older and has again adopted stalking as his primary profession. Describing his coworker, Buzzard Burbridge, Red paints a thoroughly unappealing portrait of the typical Stalker:

He was the last of the old stalkers who had started hunting for treasure right after the visitation, when the zone wasn't called the zone, when there were no institutes, or walls, or UN forces, when the city was paralyzed with fear and the world was snickering over the new newspaper hoax. Redrick was ten years old then and

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<sup>46</sup> In fact, women are granted little agency in the majority of the Strugatskiis' oeuvre. More on this in Chapter 3.



Burbridge was still a strong and agile man – he loved to drink when others paid, to brawl, to catch some unwary girl in a corner. His own children didn't interest him in the least, and he was a petty bastard even then; when he was drunk, he used to beat his wife with a repulsive pleasure, noisily, so that everyone could hear. He beat her until she died (Strugatskii 1977, 49).

The average Stalker is a deplorable character with a lack of moral foundations. However, Red's actions indicate that he is more than simply a heartless criminal. On an adventure into the zone, Red and Burbridge encounter a police force that monitors the perimeter for intruders. In an attempt to escape, Burbridge jumps into a trench containing a caustic alien substance. Burbridge is a scoundrel, but Red decides to save him when he becomes paralyzed by this "witches jelly." Risking his own life, Red drags his friend to a vehicle and manages to navigate the checkpoints leading into the city.

After delivering Burbridge to a physician, Red returns to his home. He has typical domestic encounters with his wife, child, and neighbor, then examines the loot from his adventure. Packing up the artifacts, Red walks to a bar that serves as a meeting place for Harmont's criminals: the "Borshcht." On the way, he is approached by Richard Noonan (the Enlightened Spy) who attempts to trick him into admitting to criminal activity. Dodging this unwanted encounter, Red walks into the Borshcht to meet unsavory characters and sell his treasure.

Leaving the bar with a handful of money, Red travels to Burbridge's country home to inform his family of the accident. Dina Burbridge thanks Red for delivering the "last earnings," but then breaks into an emotional attack on his behavior.

"And so, you dragged him out," she said. She wasn't asking, she was stating a fact. "You carried him, you jerk, through the whole zone, you redheaded cretin, you dragged that bastard on your backbone, you ass. You blew an opportunity like that." He was watching her, his glass forgotten. She got up and stood in front of him, walking over the scattered money, and stopped, her clenched fists jammed into her smooth hip, blocking out the entire world for him with her marvelous body smelling of perfume and sweet sweat. "He's got all of you idiots wrapped around his finger. He'll walk all over your bones. Just wait and see, he'll walk on your thick skulls on crutches. He'll show you the meaning of brotherly love and mercy!" She was screaming. "I'll bet he promised you the Golden Ball, right? The map, the traps, right? Jerk! I can see by your dumb face that he did! Just wait, he'll give you a map. Lord have mercy on the soul of the redheaded fool Redrick Shukhart." Redrick got up slowly and slapped her face hard. She shut up, sank to the grass, and buried her face in her hands. "You fool . . . Red," she muttered. "To blow an opportunity like that." (Strugatskii 1977, 66)

Dina is upset by her husband's injury, but condemns Red for saving his life. She claims that her family would be better without her crippled husband and that Red's actions will prolong their suffering. This emotional scene forces the reader to question the morality of the hero's actions, and drives Red into the nearest bar. Back at the Borshcht, Red attempts to sell his best artifacts to Ernest (the Corrupt Opportunist), but finds himself in a trap designed by Captain Quarterblad (the Oppressor). Using an alien device to create a distraction, Kelvin escapes the bar but ultimately decides to turn himself over to the police. In an emotional message left to Throaty (one of the novella's tertiary characters), Kelvin demands that all of his money be used to take care of his family.

Part 2 of *Piknik na obochine* provides a complex portrayal of the Stalker as an individual. Red is foulmouthed, violent, and iniquitous, but is driven by a natural social obligation to both his friends and family (Malmgren 1991, 116). Burbridge is nefarious and cowardly, but he is

considered worthy of sympathy by Red in his moment of need. Moreover, when faced with the consequences of his adventure into the zone – including a hysterical spouse and an untimely arrest – Red’s first instinct is to provide for his wife and daughter. In the Strugatskiis’ novella, Stalkers are conflicted and divisive individuals. Thus, if we view the Stalker as an artistic reflection of the dissident intelligentsia, it appears that the Strugatskiis sought to create a naturalistic portrayal of individuals within this unofficial culture. Like *samizdat* publishers, Stalkers are imperfect individuals who spread illegal information and contraband in the face of an antagonistic and oppressive government. Moreover, similar to many dissidents, the Stalkers’ illegal trade has devastating consequences for those closest to them.

The third part of *Piknik na obochine* is focused on Dr. Richard Noonan (the Enlightened Spy). Noonan is a well-educated bureaucrat obsessed with praise and commendation. His official position is “Supervisor of Electric Equipment Supplies for the Harmont Branch of the IIEC,” but his primary occupation is stopping the flow of illegal materials out of the zone. Noonan considers himself a successful Stalker hunter, but is constantly berated by his superiors as lazy and incompetent. Offering a glimpse into Noonan’s thoughts, the narrator illustrates a relatively abysmal worldview.

So, he thought, they got the report. Now they’ll be praising me. Well, I’m all for that. I like being praised. Especially by Mr. Lemchen himself. In spite of himself. Strange isn’t it? Why do we like being praised? It doesn’t get you any more money. Glory? What kind of glory can we have? “He’s famous: three people know about him now.” Well, let’s say four, counting Bayliss. What a funny creature man is! It seems we enjoy praise just for itself. The way children like ice cream. And it’s so stupid. How can I be better in my own eyes? As if I didn’t know myself? Good old fat Richard H. Noonan? By the way, what does that “H” stand for? What do you know about that? And there’s

nobody to ask, either. I can't ask Mr. Lemchen about it. Oh, remember! Herbert! Richard Herbert Noonan. Boy, it's pouring (Strugatskii 1977, 74).

Noonan is obsessed with praise, but he is not particularly successful at his job. Mr. Lemchen, one of his shadowy superiors, demands to know why Noonan has failed to eliminate the Stalkers. In response, Noonan lists his accomplishments and claims to have completely stemmed the theft of alien artifacts. As if springing a trap, Lemchen attacks and belittles Noonan, in the process revealing that the crippled Burbridge has been spotted selling items from the zone. Reeling from a thorough reprimand, Noonan tracks down and tortures his favorite informant.

He aimed carefully and jabbed his toe with all his strength into Mosul's shin. Mosul grunted and bent over to grab the injured spot, but immediately straightened out and stood at attention. Then Noonan jumped up, grabbed Mosul by his collar and came at him, kicking, rolling his eyes, and whispering obscenities. Mosul, moaning and groaning, rearing his head like a frightened horse, backed away from him until he fell onto the couch (Strugatskii 1977, 82).

Noonan is an oafish bureaucrat and a bully, yet he is aware of the historical importance of the visitation and alien artifacts. Like Dr. Pilman, Noonan approaches the unknown from a curious perspective, but benefits from the system that limits the spread of information. Tellingly, Noonan's principal fear is lasting change.

[T]he whole trouble is that we don't notice the years slipping by, Noonan thought. The hell with the years, we don't notice everything changing. We know that everything changes, we're taught from childhood that everything changes, and we've seen everything change with our own eyes many a time, and yet we're totally incapable of recognizing the moment when the change comes or else we look for change in the wrong place. There are new stalkers now, created by cybernetics. The old stalker was a dirty, sullen man who crawled inch by inch through the zone on his belly with mulish stubbornness, gathering his nest egg. The new stalker was a dandy in a silk tie, an engineer sitting a mile or so away from the zone, a cigarette in his mouth, a glass with a pleasant brew at his elbow, and all he does is sit and monitor some screens. A salaried

gentleman. A very logical picture. So logical that any alternative just does not come to mind (Strugatskii 1977, 85).

Noonan's main concern is that he will be made obsolete by the younger generation. Recognizing that the zone's secrets may eventually be revealed to the public either through secret or public channels, he experiences anxiety at the thought that they will inspire transformation in society. If, as I have proposed, we view the items of the zone as *ideas* instead of *objects*, we can recognize in Noonan a reflection of Brezhnev's geriatric and reactionary bureaucracy. Terrified of the liberal current embodied by the underground counterculture, the Stagnation-era leadership sought to silence perspectives that elevated individualism over political orthodoxy. Like Noonan, petty bureaucrats (e.g. censors and critics) and state elites (e.g. bureaucrats and the secret police) sought to limit the public's access to information during the Stagnation period using oppressive and regressive (i.e. Stalinist) tactics. Aware that the humanistic messages expressed in the art of the Thaw had massive public appeal, the government sought to limit the spread of ideas that did not conform to an accepted official narrative.

After abusing his mole in the Stalker underground, Noonan travels to the Borshcht and finds himself in a conversation with Dr. Pilman.

"What has the visitation changed in your life? You're a businessman. Now you know there is at least one other rational creature in the Universe besides man. So what?"

"What can I say?" Noonan was mumbling. He was sorry that he had ever started the conversation. There was nothing to talk about.

"What has changed for me? Well, for several years now I've been feeling uneasy, insecure. All right. So, they came and left right away. And what if they come again and decide to stay? As a businessman, I have to take these questions seriously: who are they, how do they live, what do they need? On the most basic level I have to think how to change my product. I have to be ready. And what if I turn out to be completely superfluous in their system?" He livened up. "What if we are superfluous? Listen,

Valentine, since we're talking about it, are there any answers to these questions? Who are they, what did they want, will they return?" (Strugatskii 1977, 86)

Noonan reiterates his fear of becoming superfluous and begins a conversation concerning the nature of the zone and its phenomena. Pilman, who attempts to guide Noonan to a more scientific perspective, declares that humankind must evolve to understand that which is beyond its experience.

All right, I'll tell you. But I must warn you that your question, Richard, comes under the heading of xenology. Xenology: an unnatural mixture of science fiction and formal logic. It's based on the false premise that human psychology is applicable to extraterrestrial intelligent beings (Strugatskii 1977, 87).

The doctor claims that the human mind is limited in its ability to understand the visitors or their mysterious artifacts. Shrinking this concept from a cosmic to a global scale, the sentiment that Pilman expresses indicates a worldview similar to that which appears in Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*: comprehension of the "other" (whether person, country, or species) requires a reevaluation of one's own cognition.

Noonan refuses to reevaluate his point of view concerning the zone even in the face of rational arguments and convincing statistical evidence. Tolerating the doctor's musings on specific alien phenomena, he is particularly combative in regard to two particular issues: the mutated youth and resurrected ancestors. In Harmont, it has become well-known that interaction with the zone causes genetic mutations in the children of Stalkers. In addition, the dead of the local graveyard have recently become reanimated and begun returning to their former homes. While Noonan claims that these phenomena can each be explained scientifically, Pilman insists that the most advantageous approach must be based in something other than intellectual

knowledge. Notably, this educated scientist suggests that human instinct, rather than rational logic, is essential to obtaining a practical understanding of the alien visitation.

Noonan becomes less and less sympathetic as the narrative progresses. Leaving the bar, he travels to Guta's apartment in hopes of unearthing information about the Harmont Stalkers. Attempting to speak tactfully, he tries to trick Guta into revealing the secrets of Red's illegal activities. When he learns Monkey has become mute because of genetic mutation, Noonan promises to seek medical advice for her condition. However, while he feigns sympathy with their unfortunate situation, he recognizes that his duties as a spy preclude him from offering any practical help: as a child of a stalker, Monkey represents an enemy of the people. When Red returns home, recently released from prison, open animosity percolates between them. As if in some intellectual dance between adversaries, Noonan and Red have an intense conversation concerning the zone and recent events. In the background of this awkward dialogue, the reanimated corpse of Red's father silently observes. Like a phantom of their forefathers sitting in judgment, the zombie watches the two representatives of the next generation with silence and marked indifference.

The portrait of Richard Noonan in *Piknik na obochine* is negative and contradictory. He is a symbol of a powerful system that controls access to information, yet his understanding of the zone's phenomena is fundamentally flawed. Terrified of change and chronically dishonest, Noonan's character is a caustic rebuke of Stagnation-era bureaucratic culture. His association with the secret police and conservative bureaucracy indicates that he is a champion of official ideology and a natural enemy to the Stalkers. However, it is his deficient personality and lack of

moral character that mark him as the novel's principal antagonist. Thus, if Red and Burbridge may be viewed as indecent criminals capable of reform, Noonan is portrayed as a cold-hearted bureaucrat unwilling to change and undeserving of salvation. Just as the juxtaposition of official and unofficial character types tilts the reader's sympathy in favor of the criminal Stalkers, however, part 4 forces us to reconsider the ethics underlying this fictional illegal counterculture.

Part 4 begins with the heading: "Redrick Shukhart, Age 31." Red, now an aging and experienced stalker, ventures into the zone on a mission to find a cure for Monkey. Arthur Burbridge, the son of Red's disfigured colleague, accompanies him on the hunt for a mysterious "golden orb." Red and Arthur seek out this artifact, which is purported to have the power to grant wishes, in order to secure the health of their respective family members. However, hidden behind his wise and weathered face, Red conceals a nefarious ulterior motive: to find the orb and save Monkey, Red must sacrifice Arthur to the zone.

The hero's internal struggle concerning the morality of this sacrifice is expressed in vivid detail. Our first introduction to his thoughts on the subject appears just as the duo enter uncharted territory.

He started down slowly after him, automatically adjusting his leg muscles to the weight of the heavy backpack. He watched Arthur out of the corner of his eye. He's scared, he thought. He must sense it. If his sense is like his father's, he does. If you only knew how things were turning out, Buzzard. If you only knew, Buzzard, that I took your advice this time. "This is one place, Red, that you can't go to alone. Like it or not, you'll have to take somebody with you. I can give you one of my people who's expendable." You talked me into it. It's the first time in my life that I agreed to something like this. Well, maybe it will turn out all right, he thought. Maybe, somehow, it will work out. After all, I'm not Buzzard Burbridge, maybe I'll figure something out (Strugatskii 1977, 112).



Red views Arthur as the key to saving Monkey, but also hopes to find a way to protect him from a violent fate. After heroically saving Arthur's life from one of the zone's dangerous phenomena, Red reevaluates the ethics of his past decisions.

There's another one I pulled out, thought Redrick. What does that make? Five? Six? And now I wonder why? He's no relation. I'm not responsible for him. Listen, Red, why did you save him? You almost got it yourself because of him. Now that my head is clear, I know why. It was right to save him, I can't manage without him, he's my hostage for Monkey. I didn't save a human being; I saved my minesweeper. My master key. Back there in the heat, I never gave it a second thought. I pulled him out like he was my flesh and blood, and didn't even think about abandoning him even though I had forgotten everything – the master key and Monkey. What does that mean? It means that I really am a good guy, after all. That's what Guta insists, and Kirill used to say, and what Richard is always babbling about. Some good guy they found! Drop it, he told himself. You have to think first, and then use your arms and legs. Got that straight? Mr. Nice Guy. I have to save him for the meatgrinder, he thought coldly and clearly. We can get past everything except the grinder (Strugatskii 1977, 117).

The protagonist views his selflessness in saving Arthur as a sign that he is a good person.

However, he is coldhearted in his intent to sacrifice the young man for the golden orb. In justifying this decision, Red puts faith in the idea that the artifact will create fundamental change in the contemporary world.

You fool, you, Burbridge, Redrick thought. You're clever, but you're a fool. How could you have trusted me? You've known me for so long, you should know me better than I know myself. You're getting old, that must be it. Getting dumber. But what am I saying, I've been dealing with fools all my life. And then he pictured Buzzard's face when he discovered that Arthur, his sweet Artie, his one and only son, that his pride and joy had gone into the Zone with Red after Buzzard's legs, not some expendable punk. He pictured his face and laughed. When Arthur turned his frightened face to look at him, Redrick went on laughing and motioned him on. And then the faces crawled across his consciousness again like pictures on a screen. Everything had to be changed. Not one life or two lives, not one fate or two – every link in this rotten, stinking world had to be changed (Strugatskii 1977, 122).

Pausing for a moment to gather his thoughts, Red witnesses Arthur walk into the zone's most dangerous trap: the "meatgrinder." This phenomenon, which Burbridge claimed could not be navigated without human sacrifice, marks the final obstacle to the magical artifact. However, before Arthur's fateful encounter with death, he enunciates a heartfelt wish for all of humanity:

"Happiness for everybody! Free! . . . As much as you want! . . . Everybody come here! There's enough for everybody! Nobody will leave unsatisfied! . . . Free! Happiness! Free!"

And then he was suddenly silent, as though a huge fist had punched him in the mouth. And Redrick saw the transparent emptiness that was lurking in the shadow of the excavator's bucket grab him, throw him up in the air, and slowly, slowly twist him, like a housewife wringing her wash. Redrick had time to see one of his dusty shoes fall off his jerking leg and fly high above the quarry. Then he turned away and sat down (Strugatskii 1977, 124).

Arthur's wish is high-minded and heartfelt, but Red's reaction to his death is apathetic and unfeeling. The final pages of *Piknik na obochine* reinforce a detailed image of Red's complex and conflicted worldview. Experiencing difficulty in expressing his own wish for humanity, Red reevaluates his relationships and chosen profession.

God, where are the words, where are my thoughts? He slapped his head. I have never had a thought in my entire life! Wait, wait, Kirill used to say something like that. Kirill! He feverishly dug through his memories, and words floated to the surface, familiar ones and unfamiliar, but it was all wrong, because Kirill had not left words behind. He had left pictures, vague, and very kind, but thoroughly improbable.

Meanness and treachery. They let me down in this too, they left me speechless, the bastards. A bum – I was always a bum, and now I'm an old bum. It's not right, do you hear me? In the future, for once and for all, it should be outlawed! Man is born in order to think (there he is, old Kirill at last!). Only I don't believe it. I didn't believe it before and I don't believe it now. And I don't know what man is born for. I was born. So here I am. People eat whatever they can. Let all of us be healthy and let all of them drop dead. Who is us and who are they? I don't understand a thing. If I'm happy, Burbridge isn't, if Burbridge's happy, Four-eyes isn't, if Throaty is happy, no one else is, and if things are bad for Throaty, he's the only one fool enough to think

he'll manage somehow. God, it's just one long brawl! I fight all my life with Captain Quarterblad, and he fights all his life with Throaty, and all he wants from me is that I give up stalking. But how can I give up stalking when I have a family to feed? Get a job? I don't want to work for you, your work makes me puke, do you understand? This is the way I figure it: if a man works with you, he is always working for one of you, he is a slave and nothing else. And I always wanted to be myself, on my own, so that I could spit at you all, at your boredom and despair (Strugatskii 1977, 125).

Red's internal monologue illustrates a thoroughly individualistic worldview. He complains that happiness is relative and unevenly distributed, and that his life has been nothing more than a "long brawl." Longing for the wisdom of his former colleague Kirill (the Intellectual Idealist), Red claims that he is incapable of expressing a truly benevolent wish. His choice to pursue a criminal lifestyle, moreover, is explained with a rational argument: placing significant value on individual agency, Red claims that his tribulations are a direct consequence of his pursuit of freedom.

The final paragraph of the Strugatskiis' novella provides a lasting impression of Red's complicated point of view. Critically, just as in Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, the protagonist abandons words in favor of emotions when dealing with the unknown.

[S]inking into the rubble, he dragged himself across the quarry to the dancing, winking ball. He was covered with sweat and panting from the heat, and at the same time, a chill was running through him, he was shuddering, as if he had a bad hangover, and the sweet chalk dust gritted between his teeth. He had stopped trying to think. He just repeated his litany over and over: I am an animal, you see that. I don't have the words; they didn't teach me the words. I don't know how to think; the bastards didn't let me learn how to think. But if you really are . . . all-powerful . . . all-knowing . . . then you figure it out! Look into my heart. I know that everything you need is in there. It has to be. I never sold my soul to anyone! It's mine, it's human! You take from me what it is I want . . . it just can't be that I would want something bad! Damn it all, I can't think of anything, except those words of his . . . "Happiness for everybody, free, and no one will go away unsatisfied!" (Strugatskii 1977, 125)

Red reiterates the wish that Arthur expressed before being mutilated by the meatgrinder. Finding it difficult to articulate his thoughts verbally, Red implores the golden artifact to look into his heart for a wish that will change the world for the better. Viewing himself as a typical example of humanity, he believes that the magical artifact will find a benevolent wish for the world in the depths of his soul. Critically, the final wish that Red makes, and for which he sacrificed the child of a close friend, bears universal implications for all of humankind.

The interview and four principal parts of *Piknik na obochine* create a powerful image of Stagnation-era Soviet culture. Moreover, the character types presented in the novella, thinly-veiled imitations of stereotypical segments of post-Stalinist society, grant insight into the fundamental motivations of individuals who lived during this awkward time. The Stalker is a controversial, divisive, and downtrodden individual, but he is the freest member of the Strugatskiis' fictional world. Dr. Richard Noonan, a petty tyrant and entrenched bureaucrat, has the greatest access to new ideas, but is the least informed individual in the narrative. Images of silent zombie forefathers and disabled, mutated youth paint a depressing picture of both past and future. However, the most controversial aspect of *Piknik na obochine* is a commentary on the consequences of enforced official culture. Noonan, Quarterblad, and Gotalin are deplorable, even in comparison to their counterculture counterparts. Furthermore, as Red expresses in his final monologue (in a portion not cited), the persecution of the Stalkers by official organs has significant consequences for society as a whole. In the Strugatskiis' novella, the alien visitation and the government's subsequent crackdown on freedom of information created a dismal and

depressing world – a situation that could only be changed with the help of a golden “idea” from the mysterious zone.

In the context of Berdiaev’s model of Russian national identity, *Piknik na obochine* approaches the “other” from a novel and complex perspective. As in Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris*, the Strugatskiis posit that an understanding of the unknown must be based in the individual’s personal instinct and emotion. Moreover, while none of the characters in *Piknik na obochine* may be viewed in an entirely sympathetic light, the descriptions of their individual approaches to the zone and its phenomena provide a model that appears to coincide with Stagnation-era reality. Framing a commentary on contemporary life in a narrative set in a fictional (foreign) future, the Strugatskiis developed an intricate and scathing portrayal of post-Stalinist Soviet society. In the process, they created a novel frame for understanding contemporary identity in the Era of Stagnation.

## Andrei Tarkovskii's *Stalker*

The significance of the *Stalker*, which Andrey Tarkovsky based on the fourth chapter of *Roadside Picnic* with the Strugatskys' cooperation (and in a harrowingly fruitful hand-to-hand combat with them described by Boris Natanovich), is widely acknowledged (Ivanov 2011, 8).

Andrei Tarkovskii's *Stalker*, based on the Strugatskii Brothers' *Piknik na obochine*, premiered to Soviet audiences in 1979. As one of the most popular works of Soviet cinema internationally, it has been the subject of more academic criticism than any other *fantastika* film adaptation in Russian history (Maguire and Rogatchevskii 2015, 125). Scholars such as Birgit Beumers, Eliot Borenstein, and Viacheslav Ivanov have approached the work from historical and sociocultural perspectives, and David Gillespie, Ant Skalandis, and Maia Turovskaia have illustrated its place in the director's artistic oeuvre. Evgenii Tsymbal (one of Tarkovskii's principal crewmembers), provides an illustration of its complicated production history in his article "Tarkovsky and the Strugatskii brothers: The prehistory of *Stalker*" (Tsymbal and Maguire 2015), and George Faraday underlines some of the *auteur* director's personal struggles with the project in *Revolt of the Filmmakers* (Faraday 2000). Tarkovskii himself has commented on the work in at least six interviews (Tarkovskii 2006), and it has received treatment from some of the most important figures in late Soviet and post-Soviet *fantastika*, including the Strugatskii Brothers, Stanislaw Lem, Viktor Pelevin, and Dmitrii Glukhovskii. Thus, instead of attempting to synthesize the multiplicity of approaches that have been applied to this film historically, I will attempt to provide a novel interpretation of its principal features in the context of Soviet sociocultural history. As part of my analysis, I will show how Tarkovskii's *Stalker* provides a

felicitous reflection of the Stagnation-era dissident worldview and improves upon the ideological message evident in the Strugatskiis' foundational text.

As discussed in my analysis of *Solaris*, Tarkovskii's approach to filmmaking is highly individualistic. Thus, while he worked with the Strugatskiis to develop the screenplay, Tarkovskii viewed the film as a product solely of his own creation.

Tarkovsky regarded himself as an equal of Shakespeare, Dostoevsky or Tolstoy. He viewed the Strugatskiis merely as staff who facilitated his genius. Consequently, he treated them without especial respect. Boris believed that the screenplay had to be rewritten nine times; according to Arkadii, 11 times. Marianna Chugunova counted more rewrites than anyone else – 12 or 13. This last estimate should probably be considered the most reliable (Tsymbal and Maguire 2015, 271).

Tarkovskii required the Strugatskiis to rewrite the screenplay for *Stalker* at least nine times,<sup>47</sup> subsequently taking considerable liberties in adapting it to film by including a number of scenes and symbols that do not appear in the original script. According to the director, the source material for the adaptation played a minimal role in the development of his final artistic vision: “*Stalker* has nothing in common with the novel, *Picnic on the Roadside*, except for two words, ‘Stalker’ and ‘Zone’” (Guerra 2006, 51). Thus, when approaching the film from an analytical perspective, it is critical to recognize that Tarkovskii viewed *Stalker* as a product of his own creation – bearing a message that differs considerably from that of the Strugatskiis' novella. Tarkovskii employed his talent as an *auteur* to create, not just an artistic interpretation of *Piknik na obochine*, but a film which expresses a wholly novel ideological perspective.

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<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, only eight drafts survive, located in the State Fond of Motion Pictures (Gosfilmofond) outside of Moscow.

*Stalker* is stylistically and ideologically complex. It alternates between monochromatic sepia and color film, is laden with complicated symbolism, and features Tarkovskii's patented contemplative cinematography. Like in *Solaris*, drawn out scenes of rural landscapes clash with close-ups that linger on the characters' faces; images of water and nature contrast with scenes from civilized domestic life; and unexplained narrative tangents create liminal space for cogent (and often indeterminate) metaphors. However, in the context of my analysis of Stagnation-era identity, the most interesting feature of Tarkovskii's adaptation is its stylistic approach to the characters.

None of the characters in *Stalker* have a name. The three principal figures are designated by their occupations (Professor, Writer, Stalker), and the protagonist's family members are defined in relation to himself (Wife, Daughter). The only moniker spoken in the entirety of the film is that of the Stalker's fallen colleague (Dikobraz).<sup>48</sup> This approach to identifying the characters is unique in my analysis of Soviet *fantastika* cinema and plays a crucial role in the development of Tarkovskii's message. In my analysis of the plot, I will explore this phenomenon as a commentary on individualist identity and its relationship to dissident culture in the context of post-Stalinist history. As part of my examination, I will show how Tarkovskii succeeded in cultivating some of the stereotypical Stagnation-era character types evident in the Strugatskiis' novella, using them to express an original, universal, and humanistic message.

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<sup>48</sup> Incidentally, this name can be translated in two ways. The most common translation of the Russian *dikobraz* is "porcupine," but an examination of the word's linguistic roots suggests another interpretation, something along the lines of "wildman" or "wildface."



*Stalker* opens with credits transposed over a lengthy scene set in a desolate bar. This introduction is followed by an excerpt from a fictional interview between Professor Wallis, a Nobel Prize Laureate (and recognizable stand-in for the Strugatskiis' Dr. Pilman), and a correspondent from RAI news.

What was it? A fallen meteorite? A visitation by inhabitants of the cosmic abyss? One way or another, the miracle of miracles has arisen in our small country – the zone. We immediately sent our armed forces there. They did not return. Then we encircled the zone with police cordons . . . and, probably, we did so rightly. . . . Although, I don't know. I don't know (Tarkovskii 1979).

This opening interview establishes the zone as a dangerous and mysterious territory. Thereafter, domestic scenes set in a cozy rural home situate the effects of the zone in the protagonist's personal life. Rolling slowly into a bedroom, the camera captures the movement of a water glass as it mysteriously slides across a coffee table, then pans across the faces of the Stalker, his daughter, and his wife as they lie together in bed. The introduction of his daughter's telekinetic abilities, which are treated more thoroughly later in the film, underscores the impact that the Stalker's profession has on his immediate family. Like the Strugatskiis' Monkey, the Stalker's daughter is a child with special needs, but she also manifests special powers. Moreover, the marital strife caused by his illegal occupation is illustrated in a dialogue between the Stalker and his wife.

Wife: You gave me your word, and I believed you. . . . Well, fine. You don't think about yourself . . . but us? You should think about your child! She hasn't even grown accustomed to you yet, and again you're getting into your old business. And I've become an old hag, you've abandoned me.

Stalker: Quiet. You'll wake the child!

Wife: I can't be waiting for you all the time, I will die! You were even preparing to get a job! They promised you a normal human job.

Stalker: That's enough, I've had it. I'll return soon.

Wife: You'll return to prison! Only now it won't be five, but ten years. And for ten years you will have nothing! Not the zone, not anything. And I will drop dead before those ten years are up.

Stalker: God, prison. For me everywhere is prison . . . let me go.

Wife: Well then go ahead! May you rot there! Damned be the day that I met you!

Scum! God himself cursed you with such a child. And I because of you, scoundrel!

Scum!

(Tarkovskii 1979)

Following their emotional argument, the Stalker's wife breaks into (conspicuously overdramatic) hysterics, writhing on the floor in tears. Establishing an image of dismal domestic existence, Tarkovskii underscores the consequences of the hero's profession on the lives of his family members. His daughter is disabled, incapable of walking but blessed with unexplained telekinetic powers; his wife is despondent, agonizing over the possibility that her husband will end up dead or in prison. Just as in *Piknik na obochine*, the Stalker's association with an illegal counterculture creates considerable hardship for those closest to him.

In the bar from the opening credits, viewers are introduced to two individuals determined to find the "inner room" of the zone – a place purported to grant miraculous wishes to those who enter. The Writer and the Professor, who each claim to be motivated by professional aspirations, implore the Stalker to guide them on a trip to find this mysterious phenomenon. Leaving the bar, the trio travel in a faulting automobile through a decrepit urban landscape. They dodge the police and a passing train, maneuvering their way through empty streets in order to reach the border of the zone. Upon arriving at a safe point, the Writer begins a monologue concerning the mutability of human desire.

Writer: I told you long ago. It's all lies. I spit on inspiration. . . . and then . . . How should I know what to call that which I want? And how do I know that I really don't want that which I don't want? I will say, I certainly do know that I don't want that which I don't want. But still they are elusive things: the moment we name them, their meaning disappears, dissolves, shreds. Like a jellyfish in the sun. Have you ever seen one? My consciousness wants the victory of vegetarianism in the whole world. But my subconscious yearns for a piece of juicy meat. So, what do I really want? (Tarkovskii 1979)

This meditation introduces a recurring theme in Tarkovskii's film: the elusiveness of desire. Like Red in *Piknik na obochine*, the Writer finds it difficult to express his wishes verbally. Because he recognizes that desire is relative and fleeting, he is reticent to make a wish that will cause fundamental change. The danger of miscommunication (or expressing oneself inappropriately), therefore, is a check on the artist's ability to influence his environment.

Entering the zone through a guarded checkpoint, the travelers are fired upon and chased by the military police. As they rush to escape, panoramic scenes of idyllic nature are contrasted with shots of dirty industrial factories and rusty iron railways. Entering a warehouse, the characters climb into a rail cart and begin their journey into the heart of the zone.

The ride into the zone is presented as a hazy transition from one material plane to another. Lasting over three minutes, the scene detailing their trip features lingering close-ups on each of the characters and disorienting background melodies. Like the scene filmed from a moving vehicle in *Solaris*, this footage represents a transition from the normal to the exotic. This impression is solidified with a transition from a stagnant sepia tone to full color film. Just as the characters complete their journey to the center of the zone, viewers are assailed with an ocean of green in an overgrown rural landscape. In this way, Tarkovskii employs a juxtaposition of

monochromatic and polychromatic film to create a contrast between reality and the “otherness” of the zone. Notably, the primitive beauty of the zone is presented in full color, whereas the bland reality of contemporary civilized existence is portrayed in sepia.

Arriving at the edge of the territory, the Professor comments on the beauty of its pristine nature before the Stalker begins a story concerning his former colleague, Dikobraz. He explains that Dikobraz is a nickname, much like “Writer” or “Professor,” but that his friend went by another name in the past: “Master.” Claiming that this Master provided him training on scouting the zone, the Stalker laments that eventually “something broke in his character . . . and he was punished” (Tarkovskii 1979). As the Stalker wanders away, the Professor discounts his unusual behavior as that of a special type of man: “A real Stalker – it is not a profession. It is in some sense a calling” (ibid.).

While a dialogue takes place between the Professor and the Writer, the Stalker reclines in a lush grassy knoll. As he embraces the vibrant foliage and looks to a clear blue sky, a peaceful expression appears on his face that is unparalleled in the film. At home in the mystical territory, the Stalker takes respite from human civilization and social obligation. After a period of rest, the trio continue on their journey, throwing tethered bolts to mark their path. When they come within sight of the compound that houses the inner room, however, the Writer becomes impatient with the Stalker’s overcautious approach to navigating the zone.

After arguing with his colleagues, the Writer begins to walk a straight path to the tattered building. When he comes near to its threshold, however, he freezes in fear, then retreats back

down the path. Reprimanding the Writer for his incautious actions, the Stalker explains the importance of maintaining a healthy respect for the zone.

The zone is a very complex system of traps, and all of them are deadly. I don't know what happens here in the absence of man. But as soon as people show up, everything comes into motion. Old traps disappear and new ones appear. Safe zones become impassable, a path that is easy and light becomes impossibly complex. That is the zone. It may even seem that she is capricious. But in every instance, we did it ourselves with our own condition. . . . I won't hide it, there were once people who had to return halfway, empty-handed. There were those who died on the very threshold of the room . . . but everything that happens here depends not on the zone, but on us. . . .

I don't know . . . I'm not sure. It seems to me that the [room] admits only those who no longer have any hope. Not the bad or the good, but the wretched. . . . Only, even the downtrodden one will die here in an instant if he does not know how to conduct himself. You are lucky, she only warned you (Tarkovskii 1979).

The Stalker's monologue reveals a fundamental feature of Tarkovskii's zone. Like that of the Strugatskiis, it is a mysterious and extremely dangerous place for the unwary. However, in *Stalker*, the zone is also a judgmental force. Notably, this adjudicator does not discriminate on the basis of moral character, allowing only the "unfortunate" to pass into the inner room. The Stalker's role as a guide is, in this light, one of a savior. As is revealed later in the film, he is something of a holy fool (*iurodivyi*), selflessly guiding the desperate into the unknown to fulfill their inner desires. However, his inability to conform to societal norms indicates that contemporary civilization is a burden to him. As the narrative progresses, the impression that the zone (as opposed to the outside world) is the Stalker's natural environment is continuously reaffirmed.

The lengthy scenes that follow the characters as they travel through the zone are interlaced with images of water (a well, a river, a pond, rain, snow) and life (lush vegetation, a dog, an owl). However, the travelers are also constantly reminded of the dangers of their environment: they come across corpses, walk safely through the “meat grinder” and “dry river,” and nearly fall victim to an undisclosed trap. Thus, when they finally reach their destination – an empty room in an underground bunker – they take a moment of rest to appreciate their fortune and success.

Inside the compound, a dialogue begins between the Professor and Writer concerning their chosen professions and their respective impacts on the world. The Writer, dismayed that his work will never be appreciated, concludes that the room will only cause him grief. In his opinion, a genius will no longer continue to write once he has captured the attention of the world. Thus, he predicts that the fulfilment of his principal wish will ultimately lead to negative consequences. The Professor, on the other hand, admits that he is driven primarily by a desire to surpass his colleagues in fame and success. In their search for the center of the zone, he finds a mysterious telephone and makes a call to one of his rivals. Declaring victory and insinuating that he will use the inner room to destroy his enemy’s research, the Professor becomes distraught when he recognizes that this pyrrhic victory has brought him no pleasure. Moreover, as is revealed in the final scenes set in the zone, the Professor conceals a dark ulterior motive.

Arriving at the penultimate room, the Professor reveals that he is in possession of a 20-kiloton bomb and intends to destroy the inner room to prevent others from using it for evil. The Stalker, attempting to steal the bomb’s trigger, is fought off when the Writer comes to the

Professor's aide. However, after the Writer berates him as a greedy hypocrite, the Stalker delivers an emotional monologue concerning his relationship to the zone.

That's not true! You're mistaken! A stalker is not allowed to enter the room. In general, a stalker is not allowed to enter the zone with selfish aims. Never! You remember Dikobraz! Yes, you're right. I am a louse. I never did anything there, in that world, and will never be able to. I couldn't even give happiness to my wife and daughter. I don't have any friends and never will. But you won't take from me what I have! I have already been deprived of everything there, beyond the barbed wire. All that I have is here! Here, in the zone! My happiness, my freedom, my dignity – all here . . . and I bring people here who are like me, unfortunate, tormented. They have nothing else to put their hope in! And I, I can help them! Me, the louse, I can do it! I cry tears of joy when I am able to help them. And that is all. . . . I can't say anymore (Tarkovskii 1979).

Fulfilling the role of a “holy fool,” the Stalker guides desperate people into the zone to give them hope, abandoning meaningful connections to the world in order to serve as a savior to the suffering. Critically, this sincere outburst of emotion has a transformative effect on his fellow travelers. The Professor, moved by the Stalker's entreaty to protect the room, dismantles the bomb and tosses its parts into a stagnant puddle. The Writer, mollified by the Stalker's speech, falls quiet after offering a half-hearted rebuttal. In the final shots set in the zone, the characters sit in silence as rain begins to pour from inside the compound.

Reverting to a sepia tone, the remainder of the film is focused on the Stalker's return to domestic life and civilization. Sick in bed, the Stalker laments his decisions and declares that he will never bring anyone into the zone again. In response, his wife delivers a touching speech to dissuade him from giving up on his calling.

You know, my mother was very much against it. You've already realized, probably, he's truly God's fool . . . the whole community laughs at him. He was a mess, pathetic . . . and mother said: he's a Stalker, he's doomed, he's an eternal prisoner. . . .

And kids. Remember what kind of kids stalkers have! . . . I didn't even argue. I knew it all: that he was doomed, and a prisoner, and about the children. . . . But what was I supposed to do? I was sure that things would be good with him. I knew, of course, that there would be a lot of grief too, but it's better to have bitter happiness than a sad gray life. Or maybe, I thought of this later. And then he simply came up to me and said, "come with me," and I went. And I never regretted it. Never! And there were times it was bad, strange, and shameful, and yet I have never regretted it and never envied anyone. This was just our fate, and our life, and this is the way we are. But if we had not had our misfortunes, it would not have been better. It would have been worse. Because there would be no happiness either, and there would be no hope (Tarkovskii 1979).

The Stalker's wife claims that she has no regrets in choosing to support a criminal husband.

Admitting that this life has caused her hardship, she declares that the struggles have been counterbalanced by joy derived from their love. Notably, she repeats a message that appears in both *Tumannost' andromedy* and *Solaris*: without suffering, happiness is impossible. Thus, even though she has suffered on account of her relationship to the Stalker, she declares that "[I]f we had not had our misfortunes . . . it would have been worse" (Tarkovskii 1979). Developing the prototype of the "Long-Suffering Dissident Wife" from the Strugatskiis' *Piknik na obochine*, Tarkovskii adds a fresh perspective on the value of suffering to the end of his seminal film.

The final scene of *Stalker* is by far its most enigmatic. Filmed in color and focused on a single character, this narrative tangent is rife with complex symbolism and imagery. The Stalker's daughter sits at a table and recites a poem, in her mother's voice, to an empty room. Thereafter, she moves water glasses across the table with telekinesis and slowly lays her head down. Maintaining an expressionless face, she sits in silence as a train passes while the choral section from the *Ode to Joy* plays boisterously in the background.



*Stalker* provides a complex portrayal of its characters' individual identities and desires. The Stalker's chosen occupation has negative consequences both for himself and his family: his handicapped daughter and disappointed wife are a constant reminder of personal failures, his status in society is attenuated by criminal associations, and his mission to bring solace to the unfortunate is unfulfilled because of the actions of those he chooses to help. Moreover, the Writer and the Professor, neither of whom ever enter the inner room, are ultimately transformed by their trip into the zone. Interacting indirectly with the mysterious room, each undergoes a fundamental reevaluation of his personal motivations and desires. However, the viewer is left to wonder at the subsequent results of these epiphanies. *Stalker* forces us to evaluate these self-examinations with no commentary on their eventual impact in the characters' lives.

Tarkovskii's film exhibits a sophisticated perspective on interpersonal dynamics. The Stalker appears to be happiest when he is in the zone, away from the civilized world and domestic reality. However, he also feels a powerful social responsibility toward his family and fellow travelers. Moreover, he is visibly distraught at the memory of the fallen Dikobraz, and relates the stories of those victimized by the zone with notable empathy. Expressing love for both his family and greater humanity, the Stalker serves as a mouthpiece for Tarkovskii's primary ideological message. This message, unsurprisingly, is one that also features in both and Sherstobitov's *Tumannost' andromedy* and Tarkovskii's *Solaris*: communication and understanding (whether between individuals, nations, or planets) are essential to the evolution of human civilization. Explicitly advocating a message of universal love, Tarkovskii's *Stalker*

provides a refreshing ideological model for Soviet citizens living in an increasingly constrictive and conservative society.

In the context of Stagnation-era sociocultural history, *Stalker* offers a unique perspective on the concept of “us” versus “them” in Berdiaev’s model of Russian national identity. Promoting a panhumanistic message in a naturalistic, yet fantastic, setting, Tarkovskii challenges contemporary society to retreat from its chauvinist and isolationist tendencies. Celebrating individual freedom and the benefits of a personal approach to the unknown, *Stalker* provided a welcome alternative to the worldview promoted by official Soviet culture during the Stagnation period. Making use of his artistic talent and position as a privileged intellectual, Tarkovskii approaches his subject from a humanistic perspective. Representing a significant departure from the trends of contemporary mainstream cinema, the *auteur* director’s final Soviet project completely foregoes political thematics and exhibits a novel approach to the evaluation of individual identity.

Tarkovskii’s *Stalker* illustrates features of the dissident intelligentsia’s “unofficial” worldview in the Stagnation period. It is primarily concerned with personal and interpersonal issues, focuses on questions of human existence, and considers issues of social, ethical, and philosophical consequence. It elevates the individual above the collective while judiciously avoiding straightforward commentary on political thematics. Unlike its mainstream counterparts, it paints a picture of a world completely detached from Soviet dogma or ideological influence. It offers a humanistic approach to understanding the world, while also painting its characters as flawed and imperfect beings. As such, it may be considered a useful prism through which to

view the perspective of a community that was emboldened by the Thaw and then suppressed during the Stagnation period.

Tarkovskii's film created a model for *auteur* directors in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The impact that *Stalker* had on the development of the Soviet worldview in the long term is difficult to quantify. However, because the single most impactful feature of *Stalker* ultimately became its principal character, I will end this section with a quote by Andrei Tarkovskii concerning his innovative protagonist:

He is a very honest man, clean, and intellectually innocent. His wife describes him as "cheerful." He leads men into the Zone to, he says, make them happy. He gives himself completely to this task, with a total lack of self-interest. He believes that it's the only way to make people happy. In the end his is the story of the last of the idealists. It's the story of a man who believes in the possibility of happiness independent of the will and the capacity of man. His job gives meaning to his life. As if he were a priest of the Zone, the stalker leads men there to make them happy. In reality, no one can say for sure if anyone there is happy. At the end of his journey to the Zone, under the influence of the people he is leading, he loses faith in the possibility of making all of mankind happy. He can no longer find anyone who believes in this Zone or in the happiness to be found in this room. In the end he finds himself alone with his idea of human happiness achieved by a pure faith (Guerra 2006, 51).

# Chapter 3

## The Russian Idea in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet *Fantastika* (1986-2017)

The Brezhnev era had been a retreat from previous waves of truth seeking and revelations of “hidden crimes” that had begun with Khrushchev’s Secret Speech. . . . [but] to say that two decades between Brezhnev’s installation and Gorbachev’s ascension were nothing but “stagnation” is certainly a caricature. The proliferation of countercultures and subcultures, as well as alternative artistic organizations, was never completely crushed by the state’s repressive apparatus, to which it resorted with far less frequency and severity than in the Stalin era; the flowering dissent and experimentation that characterized perestroika did not come from nowhere (Borenstein 2008, 7).

How does one distinguish the contemporary Russian worldview from that which existed in the final years of the Soviet Union? What can the consequences of the transformation from the USSR to the RF tell us about the core features of Russian identity? This chapter will approach these questions and others through an analysis of ten *fantastika* film adaptations produced in the period from 1986 to 2017. Beginning with an investigation of two films from the fifth period of *fantastika* film adaptation (1986-1999), I will illustrate some of the consequences of Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms and the disintegration of the Soviet Union on Russian cultural mentality. Examining the evolution of national identity in the “Putin Era” (2000-2017), an analysis of ten films will serve to contextualize my arguments concerning *fantastika* cinema as a window into the twenty-first century Russian worldview.

In addition to illustrating the role of *fantastika* literature and cinema in the development of contemporary Russian identity, this chapter will also consider critical social, economic, and

political transformations under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and Vladimir Putin. As part of my analysis, I will highlight similarities between Soviet and post-Soviet cinema and identify crucial differences that inform my theories on the evolution of the Russian worldview in the twenty-first century. As in previous chapters, my aim here is not to be comprehensive, but rather to highlight areas in which an examination of *fantastika* film adaptations and their corresponding literary sources may shed light on features of national identity in any given period of Russian history.

## **Clarity, Collapse, Chaos: Anxiety and History in *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein* and *Rokovye iaitsa* (1986-1999)**

The period from 1986 to 1999 was one of the most chaotic in Russian history.

Gorbachev's radical reform of the Soviet socio-political landscape, best identified with the famous policy "*glasnost*' – *perestroika* – *uskorenie*" ("transparency – restructuring – acceleration"), created a situation in which long-standing official narratives of Soviet identity were revealed as artless fabrications (Fitzpatrick 2005, 307). In addition to the state-approved revelation of crimes committed by previous regimes, a restructuring of the socio-political landscape and opening of markets to Western media incubated the conditions for a culture-wide ideological crisis. No longer projecting an image of unquestionable authority to either internal or external observers, the Soviet leadership sacrificed its dominant position in the "official/unofficial" sociocultural paradigm. As a result, the nation entered into a period of profound instability – one which continued under both a new leader and a new flag in the following decade.

This section will provide commentary on the greatest wave of cultural liberalism in twentieth-century Russian history through an analysis of two *fantastika* film adaptations: *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein* (1989) and *Rokovye iaitsa* (1995). It will show that, while Gorbachev may be considered the worst leader in Soviet history by the majority of contemporary Russians,<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> This is based on an analysis of polls taken by the Levada Center from 2001 to 2018. Recent data indicates that over half of Russians believe that *perestroika* played a negative role in the life of the country and at least 30 percent of respondents "dislike" Mikhail Gorbachev, with another 30 percent claiming to be "indifferent" toward him (Levada Analytical Center 2018).

the consequences of his reforms on the evolution of post-Soviet identity are virtually impossible to overestimate. In my examination of the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, I will illustrate the ways in which the chaos and instability that characterized Yeltsin's Russian Federation may be understood as a direct consequence of the sociocultural and political trends initiated under Gorbachev's leadership. The evolution of Russian national identity over the course of the late-1980s and 1990s, furthermore, will be considered in the context of a loosening of censorship restrictions, increased interaction with foreign cultures, and the mass privatization of the (formerly state-controlled) national film industry.

Considering the rise of individualist liberties under Gorbachev's leadership in the context of theories presented by Nikolai Berdiaev, Vladimir Bibler, Eliot Borenstein, Birgit Beumers, and Stephen Norris, this portion of my dissertation highlights fundamental transformations in the Russian worldview during the late-Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The consequences of Gorbachev's reforms, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the rise of market capitalism form the center of my arguments concerning the development of Russian *fantastika* cinema in a period characterized by political, economic, and cultural instability.

### Boris and Arkadii Strugatskii's *Trudno byt' bogom*

The Strugatskiis' *Trudno byt' bogom* was one of the most popular works of *fantastika* fiction ever published in the Soviet Union (Howell 1994, 8). After *Piknik na obochine*, it is the brothers' most adapted literary text, enjoying an even broader readership in both foreign translation and *samizdat* circulation than their highly-regarded *Ponedel'nik nachinaetsia v subbotu* or *Obitaemyi ostrov* (Strugatskii 2003, 114).<sup>50</sup> Moreover, if *Piknik* managed to temporarily skirt the censors by surreptitiously expressing ideas considered unacceptable to the Soviet bureaucracy in the 1970s,<sup>51</sup> the earlier *Trudno byt' bogom* provides a seemingly unabashed criticism of Soviet totalitarianism and Communist political history (Howell 1994, 10). Published in 1964, the message of the novella is summarized by literary historian Elana Gomel in the following way:

Read as a political allegory, the main message of *Hard to Be a God* resides precisely in the parallelism between the historical developments of Nazism and Stalinism which enables their simultaneous encoding in the same literal-level plot. This message reinforces an idea that is, at the same time, its condition of intelligibility: that Nazism and Stalinism are similar, if not identical, phenomena. At the time of the book's writing, this idea was widespread in the circles of the Strugatskys' main audience: the dissident Soviet intelligentsia. The Strugatskys' unrivalled popularity with this audience is largely explained by the fact that the brothers were its faithful spokesmen, saying what the readers already knew but wanted to hear (Gomel 1995, 183).

As a mouthpiece for the dissident intelligentsia, the Strugatskiis' criticism of authoritarianism (and, indirectly, historical Soviet practice) contributed to the Brezhnev regime's reactionary

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<sup>50</sup> Aside from the two feature film adaptations described in this dissertation, *Trudno byt' bogom* has also been adapted into a stage play, a popular radio drama, and a dedicated video game. Boris Strugatskii himself cited it as among their best writings (Strugatskii 2003, 112).

<sup>51</sup> See my analysis of *Piknik na obochine* in Chapter 2.



response to liberalism in the arts (Potts 1991, 14). More importantly, however, the brothers' writings served as a unifying force in the underground counterculture and were critical to the evolution of its collective identity. This "dissident" or "unofficial" identity, which was repressed by the regimes of Brezhnev, Chernenko, and Andropov, became a rejuvenated (and later, predominant) force in Soviet sociocultural dialogue under Gorbachev's liberalizing leadership (Fitzpatrick 2005, 305).

*Trudno byt' bogom* is set on the distant planet Arkanar. Experiencing a period of sociocultural and political oppression, Arkanar is described as a world developing through the Dark Ages of human civilization. The novella's hero, Anton (more commonly referred to by his adopted name, Don Rumata), is an employee of the Earth-based "Institute of Experimental History." The institute, which is responsible for studying alien cultures and guiding them on their path to stable civilization, watches over the planet from orbit while nominating a number of researchers to live within the society itself.

The narrative of *Trudno byt' bogom* follows Anton through both adventure and calamity on this foreign world. An optimistic scientist, Anton's primary goal is to support the surviving engineers, artists, and cosmologists who will advance the planet into the next stage of civilization. He is, in essence, a superhuman, supported by both evolved physical abilities and a constant connection to his team of intellectually advanced colleagues in space. However, the violence, corruption, and oppression that characterize Arkanar's feudal society ultimately drive Anton into madness: after witnessing the savage treatment of his scientist subjects, a palace coup led by a corrupt bureaucrat, and the murder of his native love interest, the hero initiates a gory

massacre of the planet's leadership. Aghast at Anton's devolution into barbarism, the institute recalls him from the mission and, as is evident from the prologue, returns him to Earth for rehabilitation.

Based on this limited description, one might question the allegorical connection between Arkanar's feudal society and that of the Soviet Union. However, with their trademark artistic dexterity, the Strugatskiis wove distinctive cultural markers into their narrative to create an all-too-evident image of Soviet political history (McGuire 1985, 71). A bloody revolution orchestrated by the fanatical "Grays" topples Arkanar's aristocrat government, leading to the rise of a totalitarian bureaucracy. The pseudo-fascist Grays, like their bourgeois predecessors, violently oppress the population through purges and mass executions. Reserving exceptional brutality for artists and intellectuals, the government imprisons and tortures those who attempt to spread new ideas and ideologies to the impoverished lower class. Don Reba, the novella's principal antagonist, is a model of a totalitarian leader and a transparent simulacrum for both Stalin and Lavrentii Beria.<sup>52</sup> A bureaucrat with a murky history, Reba uses political cunning and sadistic violence to usurp and maintain power – relying on a network of fanatics and former criminals to spread terror and carry out assassinations. Reba's murder or imprisonment of virtually all of the novella's secondary characters is directly responsible for Anton's ultimate descent into madness.

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<sup>52</sup> The Strugatskiis' original name for the character, "Rebia" (an anagram for "Beria"), was changed on the advice of Ivan Efremov (Strugatskii 2003, 112).

As Boris Strugatskii conceded himself, the message of *Trudno byt' bogom* is overtly pessimistic (Strugatskii 2003, 111). Moreover, as literary historian Yvonne Howell points out in her analysis of the Strugatskiis' oeuvre,

[*Hard to Be a God*] very successfully adapts the straight adventure/historical novel form to the parabolic mode of science fiction. It is an "educational novel" insofar as the hero's adventures and the sociopolitical setting in which they take place can be seen as analogous to a historical or contemporary situation in the empirical world. In the 1964 novel the authors have little use for intertextual allusion, landscaped subtexts, or prefigurative motifs, all of which are essential stylistic and structural components of the mature novels (Howell 1994, 10).

Considered from this perspective, *Trudno byt' bogom* is a relatively straightforward criticism of violence and totalitarianism in the context of Soviet history. Purges, massacres, murders, assassinations – these are the images that characterize true darkness in the novella. Oppression, corruption, betrayal, ignorance – these are the features of an authoritarian regime. Thus, if the Strugatskiis may be viewed as a mouthpiece for the dissident intelligentsia, it is evident that one of the group's primary concerns was ensuring that a system with these characteristics never rise again. The profoundly pessimistic message that concludes the novella – that social progress is both mutable and reversible – is a powerful warning against a reversion to authoritarian forms of state control.

In the midst of Gorbachev's reforms, many dissident authors were rehabilitated in the public arena and given the opportunity to publish some of their formerly unprintable texts (Gillespie 2003, 63). As unofficial culture came to the forefront of Soviet society, it replaced the monotony of the former official narrative with a diversity of ideological approaches. Some of these approaches were new (as I will discuss in my examination of Putin-era cinema), but the

majority came into the late Soviet sociocultural mentality through the introduction of formerly underground texts to mass culture. Those works that had been popular in *samizdat* circulation enjoyed relative success in the late 1980s (ibid), and the authors and directors who were respected among the intelligentsia became icons of pre-collapse Soviet culture. This is the means by which the Strugatskiis' *Trudno byt' bogom*, a work formerly condemned by the Brezhnev regime, became one of the most ambitious projects of late-Soviet cinema.

The narratives of Peter Fleischmann's *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein* and Aleksei German's *Trudno byt' bogom* bear uncommon resemblance both to one another and their original literary source. In juxtaposition to the level of artistic license taken by directors like Andrei Tarkovskii or Evgenii Sherstobitov, it is notable that Fleischmann and German chose to leave the plot structure, timeline, and primary conflict of the Strugatskiis' novella virtually unchanged in their adaptations. This would seem to indicate that the narrative style and ideological message of *Trudno byt' bogom* continued to resonate with artists and intellectuals in both the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Like *Gadkie lebedi* and *Obitaemyi ostrov*, which I discuss later in the chapter, *Trudno byt' bogom* served as a source of inspiration for directors seeking to address issues common to their contemporary societies.

### Peter Fleischmann's *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein*

The fact that *chernukha* was prominent in such disparate realms as film, media, and fiction shows that the barriers glasnost broke down were ones of genre and cultural hierarchy as well as simply content: all three areas were able to combine the seriousness of purpose and the moral weightiness of high art with the all-but-unmentionable grotesque details of contemporary misery (Borenstein 2008, 16).

*Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein*, which premiered to Soviet audiences in 1989, is something of an anomaly in the history of Russian cinema.<sup>53</sup> A high-budget, international collaboration to adapt an ideologically controversial novella (one written by authors considered anti-establishment pariahs only a few years prior), it is the only work of its kind in Soviet history. However, while Fleischmann's film appears atypical against the backdrop of decades of socialist realism and enforced dogmatic prescriptions, it is a model example of Soviet cinema produced in the liberalized sociocultural environment of the late 1980s. Like the *chernukha* cinema<sup>54</sup> that came to define the period (Borenstein 2008, 13), *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein* is a fitting reflection of the Soviet sociocultural mindset on the cusp of the nation's unexpected political collapse.

In the same way that Nikita Khrushchev liberalized the Soviet cultural space during the Thaw, Gorbachev's campaigns aimed to reinstate personal freedoms and redefine the

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<sup>53</sup> The Russian title, "*Trudno byt' bogom*," is shared by Aleksei German's 2014 adaptation. I have chosen to use the German title in my analysis of Fleischmann's film for the sake of organizational clarity.

<sup>54</sup> Eliot Borenstein defines *chernukha* as "the pessimistic, naturalistic depiction of and obsession with bodily functions, sexuality (usually separate from love), and often sadistic violence, all against a backdrop of poverty, broken families, and unrelenting cynicism" (Borenstein 2008, 11).

government's relationship to the public and global community. In both cases, the broadening of social dialogue created the conditions for a flood of underground and international media into mainstream Soviet culture. On the one hand, this led to the introduction of a plethora of new ideas, worldviews, and ideologies, creating a boom in intellectual exploration and a diversification of approaches to the study of national culture. On the other hand, however, the cacophony of voices and heterogeneity of perspectives also had a profoundly negative effect. In a world with such diversity of opinion, it became difficult to identify those ideas which would be useful to the future development of Russian civilization. Soviet identity, which had been shattered by revelations made through *glasnost*, suffered an ideological crisis (Borenstein 2008, 6).

The loosening of censorship during *perestroika* allowed artists to apply a critical eye not only to the Stalinist past, but also to contemporary cultural, political, and economic circumstances (Horton and Brashinsky 1992, 35). Perhaps unsurprisingly, some directors chose to focus on the conditions that preceded Gorbachev's reforms, maintaining special ire for societal ills they considered characteristic of the Stagnation period. Describing the circumstances that led to the birth of Russian *chernukha*, Birgit Beumers writes:

[G]lasnost merely exposed and uncovered the stagnation of social development and human life, and added to it the growing lack of emotion, responsibility and moral values, which ultimately led to the *chernukha* film as logical culmination and conclusion to the process begun during the Stagnation (Beumers 2009, 208).

The loss of a shared moral code or, rather, the inability to agree on one collectively, motivated a number of Soviet directors to experiment with the darker aspects of modern reality. As if in

attempt to realign the collective conscience of the Russian people, some employed ultraviolence (in the Kubrickian sense)<sup>55</sup> to test the limits of the socially acceptable. Thus, as Borenstein notes in his analysis of *perestroika*-era cinema, an examination of the plots of *Interdevochka*, *Malen'kaia vera*, *Bespredel*, or *Igla* (all premiering in 1988-1989) reveals an almost pornographic obsession with the depiction of cruelty and brutality.<sup>56</sup> A genre created intentionally to shock the viewer's conscience, its ascension to popularity marks a significant departure from traditional Soviet cultural and cinematic tendencies. No longer reticent to comment openly on the ills of contemporary existence, directors of *chernukha* took the freedom to criticize to sometimes unconscionable extremes.

Describing *chernukha*'s place in the context of *glasnost*' and *perestroika*, Borenstein illustrates the underlying conditions that contributed to the genre's rise in popularity.

Chernukha could not have been what the architects of *perestroika* had in mind when they launched the campaign for *glasnost*, and yet, two decades later, each is inconceivable without the other. Unintended consequences or not, *chernukha* was the apotheosis of *glasnost*: the rejection of enforced optimism based on lies and an insistence on uncovering long-suppressed truths. By the very nature of the system (and its systematic dismantling), such truths could only be unpleasant. . . . Though the stories told in the *chernukha* vein were often near-dystopian nightmares of moral relativism, they unfolded against a backdrop of a rather naïve and binary rhetoric of the "Truth" (often with a capital T). After years of deception, the Truth would literally set the country free (Borenstein 2008, 13).

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<sup>55</sup> This term is defined in the Collins Dictionary as: "acts of extreme violence, especially those shown on television or film" and on Wiktionary as: "unnecessary, unprovoked (usually brutal) violence; violent acts simply for the thrill and entertainment of it."

<sup>56</sup> Igor Gostev's 1989 *Bespredel* is technically one of the founding films of the pseudo-genre "*bespredel*." According to Eliot Borenstein, "*Bespredel* (the genre) takes *chernukha* to its logical extreme, presenting violence, crime, and collapse as phenomena that defy all logic, perpetrated by criminals whose amorality is so shocking that they are often rendered as inhuman" (Borenstein 2008, 23). Because *Bespredel* features all of the primary features of *chernukha* addressed in my study, I have chosen to treat it as a sub-genre.

*Chernukha* is an inherently “unpleasant” genre, focused on exposing uncomfortable truths and defined by portrayals of violence, oppression, misery, and other negative aspects of everyday life. The mindless cruelty of its protagonists, who are more readily described as villains than heroes, coupled with depictions of decrepit industrial wastelands and appalling domestic conditions create an ominous aura of hopelessness – the genre’s most defining feature. Crucially, unlike some of the more moralistic films of the Stagnation period, these works “contained no solutions for the misery that they depicted” (Beumers 2009, 3). They spoke “a new language about the bleakness and desperation of contemporary society, of people frustrated and crippled by years of suppression or stagnation” (ibid.). Although characteristically vapid in terms of ethics and morality, *chernukha* served as an effective means to express the perspective of a society coming to terms with both a sordid past and a nebulous future.

While *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein* is not a prototypical example of *chernukha* per se, it bears many of the stylistic hallmarks that made the genre popular. Like most works of *chernukha*, it lacks any form of constructive ideological message. Its pervasive and grotesque depictions of violence and oppression create an atmosphere of utter hopelessness, and the narrative’s (surviving) characters are ultimately left destitute and directionless. Thus, although the film is more aptly defined as a work of science fiction, the worldview expressed in *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein* is readily comparable to that characteristic of the *chernukha* genre. Consequently, Fleischmann’s film forms part of a wider trend in late Soviet cinema – one that provides evidence of a struggle for a new form of identity in the context of *glasnost*.



Fleischmann's adaptation is more faithful to its literary source than any other film discussed in this dissertation. Strictly maintaining both the message and plot structure of the Strugatskiis' text, the director fashioned an almost scene-by-scene recreation. Notably, however, Fleischmann's work elevates the brutality, violence, and oppression characteristic of the novella to a sickening extreme. With a body count on par with American action films such as *Rambo III* (1988), *Total Recall* (1990), and *The Punisher* (1989), it was among the bloodiest films ever created at the time of its release.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, with a significant number of scenes featuring torture, murder, and mass execution, Fleischmann's adaptation provides a particularly disturbing reflection on both the nature of totalitarianism and Soviet political history.

Like the Strugatskiis' *Trudno byt' bogom, Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein* consists of two narrative layers: a primary layer following events on the planet Arkanar, and a secondary layer focused on the scientists orbiting the planet. The film begins with a transposed transcription of a note written by Budach, a native of Arkanar.

In the border area between Irukan and Arkanar<sup>58</sup> numerous residents witnessed a bright point of light near the moon that was approaching fast and turning night into day. The following night, the light had vanished. Many believe this phenomenon to be a sign from God. They persecute everyone who doubts this and do not bear in mind that the imperfection of the eye can make it impossible for us to understand natural phenomenon. In the year 812 of the old gods. – Budach (Doctor and Scholar) (Fleischmann 1989)

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<sup>57</sup> The film features over two-hundred dead bodies. There are over a dozen on-screen murders. Executions, hangings, beheadings, and corporal punishment are so ubiquitous over the course of the film that their individual instances are virtually impossible to enumerate.

<sup>58</sup> Just as in the Strugatskiis' novella, Arkanar is both the name of the planet and the name of one of its kingdoms.

The opening scenes depict the valiant Anton (a.k.a. Don Rumata) riding a horse through a mountainous wasteland. His overall appearance is disheveled – yet aristocratic – and is conspicuously similar to that of Connor MacLeod from the American *Highlander* series.

The hero's first social interactions paint him as a brave, thrill-seeking knight. Coming across the path of a singer named Suren, Anton learns that Arkanar is under invasion by a group of soldiers led by the so-called "Grays." As the pair approach a provincial town, Anton purposefully instigates a fight with local soldiers stating: "I've been riding my horse for too long, there hasn't been any time to brawl" (Fleischmann 1989). Defeating them soundly, he exhibits the same fearless nature and fighting skill as the hero of the Strugatskiis' novella while establishing himself as a powerful enemy of the boorish Grays.

Traveling into the Kingdom of Arkanar, Anton enters a castle and introduces himself as Don Rumata Estorskii. The king of Arkanar, a hedonist with simian features, invites Anton to sample some of the city's delicacies (including pickled dog ears and fish blood) before offering him the privilege of "putting on the king's right shoe" (Fleischmann 1989). The ruler's lavish lifestyle and inability to empathize with others is established immediately and reinforced regularly throughout the film. Illustrating some of the negative qualities typical of the Russian aristocracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the king and nobility of Arkanar enjoy opulent lifestyles while treating the common people as "cattle and dogs" (ibid.). The fact that the ruler and his family are ultimately murdered in a palace coup, and the aristocracy decimated by the working-class Grays, underlines a parabolic connection between the events on Arkanar and the historical foundations of the Soviet Union.

Fleischmann's depiction of the aristocracy is focused predominantly on their affinity for excess and thoughtless disregard for the lower class. However, if this portrayal may be viewed as a mild indictment of the pre-Revolution Russian aristocracy, the criticism leveled at the usurping authority should be considered an unmercifully scathing rebuke. Don Reba, Arkanar's Minister of Defense and the film's principal villain, is a saboteur bent on usurping and maintaining power. His actions throughout the film are heartless to an extreme, and the multiple murders, purges, tortures, and revolutions he oversees mark him as an autocrat with a penchant for sadism. Like those of the primary villain in the Strugatskiis' novella, many of Reba's actions are unmistakably similar to those carried out by Stalin.

After Anton's first encounter with Reba, the hero finds his colleague Kirill in the palace dungeon. Kirill, injured and distraught, claims to have abandoned his mission as an impartial observer on Arkanar in favor of helping the natives. He states: "I don't want to study them anymore like rabbits and mice. They are just like us; we need to help them. They are our brothers, they are suffering. They need us" (Fleischmann 1989). Kirill begins to explain that Reba is the planet's only hope for survival, but is interrupted by the onset of a palace coup. Reba, conspiring with the Grays, performs a purge of the aristocracy under the guise of protecting the king from a conspiracy to assassinate him. Kirill, surprised by the unexpected brutality, immediately denounces Reba but is murdered by a Gray soldier as Anton watches in disbelief.

From this point forward, virtually every scene in the primary narrative is saturated with images of suffering and grotesque violence. Shortly after Kirill's murder, a close-up offers viewers an unnerving glimpse into the realities of existence on Arkanar: a man's life drains from

his eyes as he is hung from the “Tower of Joy” – a structure specifically designated for torture. The Grays and, later, the red-robed “Warrior Monks,” carry out massacres and mass executions under Reba’s orders, leaving a trail of carnage in their wake. Victims are buried alive and burned at the stake, children kidnapped and tortured, piles of bodies line the streets as books are burned and intellectuals murdered. In one particularly gruesome scene, a live boar is slaughtered and the camera zooms in as it slowly bleeds out. Like those found in *chernukha* films such as *Malen'kaia vera* or *Bespredel*, these scenes are disturbing and overwhelming – specifically designed to shock the viewer’s conscience. The overall aura of oppression and misery is palpable, and there appears to be little hope for the future of civilization under this totalitarian regime.

Even the few positive social interactions that the hero experiences are undercut by the violence visited on those with whom he associates. Gauk, a craftsman responsible for inventing a makeshift printing press, is murdered – crushed with his own creation. Okana, a court socialite and Anton’s (first) lover, is murdered, mutilated, and sent to him in a box. Bagir, an architect and engineer, is beaten to death by a crowd of anti-intellectual fanatics. A group of emaciated peasants, led into battle against the Grays by Suren, are captured, tortured, and then executed one-by-one with the help of a so-called “God machine.”<sup>59</sup> The warrior Baron Pampa, one of the only characters with whom Anton establishes a recognizable friendship, is decapitated by Reba. The few Arkanarian characters that survive to the end of the film, moreover, are left leaderless and directionless as Anton is forcibly exfiltrated into orbit by his colleagues. Suren and Kira,

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<sup>59</sup> The use of chutes for disposing of bodies and mechanical nature of the executions performed with the God machine remind one of the genocide at Auschwitz (and, for that matter, at Katyn). It is also noteworthy that the God machine appears to be a modified version of Gauk’s printing press.

Anton's (second) lover, are abandoned in a courtyard filled with dead bodies and sleeping hostile soldiers.

The secondary narrative layer of Fleischmann's film offers intermittent reprieves from the darkness and terror on Arkanar. Anton's interactions with his colleagues in orbit – and their interactions between each other and authorities on Earth – form the center of the film's ideological message. Just as in the Strugatskiis' novella, Anton is a member of a crew sent to observe Arkanar and guide it into the next stage of civilization. In Fleischmann's adaptation, however, considerably more emphasis is placed on the secondary reason for their mission: to study the effects of observing Arkanar on the scientists themselves.<sup>60</sup> Coming from a utopian world in which there is “no war, no violence, and no crying” (ibid.), these scientists from Earth slowly begin to change while observing the events that take place on the planet. Aside from Anton, who devolves from an impartial scientist to the mastermind of a bloodthirsty rebellion, the most recognizable transformation can be seen through the actions of a crewmember named Anka.

Along with the rest of her colleagues, Anka observes Anton's actions from orbit through a series of displays. As a supervisor, she helps to support the hero with logistics and information concerning events on the planet to which he is not privy. However, while their relationship at the beginning of the film appears entirely professional, Anka begins to develop feelings for Anton as the events on Arkanar unravel. She becomes distraught when Anton, for the purpose of his

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<sup>60</sup> This idea is touched upon in the Strugatskiis' novella, but plays a significantly greater role in Fleischmann's adaptation.

mission, has sexual intercourse with Okana. Moreover, as she observes Anton in bed with his second lover (Kira), she begins to shed tears. The fact that there is “no crying” on the scientists’ home planet is reinforced by the shock with which her colleagues react to this unexpected biological response. Anka, a theoretically impartial scientist who never steps foot on the planet, is transformed through mere observation. In the words of one of her unnamed colleagues: “Anton is not the only one who is changing, we are also changing” (Fleischmann 1989).

This brings us to the central crux of the film’s message, best illustrated through two interactions between the scientists and the mission’s superintendent on Earth – Mita (played by Werner Herzog). The first comes in the aftermath of Anka’s emotional outbreak, as a result of the commotion it caused among members of the crew. Speaking in a video message, Mita cautions them to avoid becoming victims of their emotional instincts.

I regret to see how quickly the virus of barbarism is spreading among the crew of the space station, how intolerance and aggression are gradually becoming manifest. In previous times, this came about for those of your colleagues who were driven by their emotions. Although it seemed that, on Earth, they were able to control them. But with a few we got there too late: they died tragically for this very reason. I urge you to take all measures to ensure that this dangerous phenomenon does not get out of control. Thank you (Fleischmann 1989).

Mita’s warning underscores the danger faced by the mission’s crew: while observing events on the planet, they are at risk of social devolution. The overwhelming proof of this possibility, illustrated by Anton’s wild attack on Arkanar’s ruling class, prompts Mita to return for a conversation with the mission’s on-site chief – Aleksandr.

Aleksandr: I consider the situation here extreme. We should let them see us. Maybe our intervention will be good for them.

M: We can’t help them, Aleksandr. We are separated by a thousand years.

A: You are suggesting that we abandon our normal human impulses. But we are not gods, and there have been occasions when one among us couldn't keep himself from helping someone in need.

M: But we are not talking about them now. Our goal is to understand our own essence.

A: What a paradox! To observe another world in order to fix our earthly problems!

M: Yes, it is important to determine if we can manage the process of development, and to what extent our past dominates us.

A: Well, can we?

M: To put it more simply, it is possible for us to slip back onto the path of darkness, irrationality, and barbarism. This has been proven by our observations.

A: So, it turns out that we are the object of study?

M: Yes, Aleksandr. You are typical representatives of our planet.

(Fleischmann 1989)

Mita's revelation provides an unappealing glimpse into the realities of Earth's supposedly utopian society. No longer plagued by violence, oppression, or negative emotions, the scientists have come to Arkanar to gain a better understanding of their own development. However, the fact that the mission is abandoned (as well as the planet itself) indicates that Earth's civilization is not inherently superior to that on Arkanar. As Mita states in this final dialogue, the greatest danger for the inhabitants of Earth is a devolution in social development. The consequences of a reversion to barbarism, violence, and authoritarianism is constantly reinforced by the tragedy that characterizes life on Arkanar. Just as the Strugatskiis' novella had done in the 1960s, therefore, Fleischmann's adaptation offers a powerful warning against reverting to violent and authoritarian forms of state control.

*Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein* is pessimistic and violent, filled with images of death, suffering, and heartless oppression. Like the *chernukha* that came to define the late-Soviet period (or its ideologically similar pseudo-genre cousin – *bespredel* – which thrived in the 1990s), it

betrays an interest both in shocking the viewer's conscience and creating an impression of hopeless despair. Viewed in the context of late Soviet sociocultural history, however, the most crucial feature of Fleischmann's film (and for that matter, the *chernukha* genre itself) is that it completely foregoes constructive ideological messages. Offering no solutions to the ethical and philosophical problems it poses, it instead provides a (graphic) warning to those who would seek to glorify or downplay the atrocities of the past.

As previously mentioned, Russian society began to experience a crisis of identity in the years leading up to Soviet collapse. Gorbachev's liberalization, while opening up new avenues for intellectual exploration and artistic expression, also caused a massive shift in one of the foundational paradigms of historical Russian identity. For the first time in Soviet (and for that matter, Russian) history, the government sacrificed its position as ideological monolith, opening itself to criticism and granting individuals the freedom to decide for themselves the foundations of contemporary identity. The government (i.e. *samoderzhavie*), which had sat atop Sergei Uvarov's theoretical *troika* of Russian national identity since at least the nineteenth century, was gradually replaced by the people (i.e. *narodnost'*) as ideological authority.<sup>61</sup> The historical relationship between the people as a collective and the person as an individual, moreover, was also challenged: individualist ideology, which had been oppressed during the Stagnation period after a short heyday during the Thaw, was again granted comparable footing with collectivist doctrine. Consequently, the Soviet leadership lost its dominant position in the

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<sup>61</sup> Here I am relying on Vladimir Bibler's theories on Uvarov's *troika* of Russian national identity. In his model, "*pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost'*" is equivalent to "the church, the government, and the people."



“official/unofficial” sociocultural dynamic, making way for a society led by former dissidents and the intellectual elite in ethical and dogmatic concerns.

The transformation in the relationship between the government and the people that took place in the late Soviet period created an ideological vacuum. Former official narratives of Soviet identity were undermined, and new ones had not yet had time to form. For this reason, some writers and directors chose to experiment with the darker aspects of contemporary reality while generally eschewing constructive ideological messages. They employed grotesque depictions of violence, poverty, and misery to create messages based in feelings where no messages based in words existed. After years of oppression and ideological stagnation, the ultraviolent and hopeless narratives of *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein* and works of *chernukha* offered a form of catharsis to Soviet citizens – allowing them to vent frustrations and reflect on contemporary sociocultural circumstances. However, as I discuss in my analysis of post-Soviet *fantastika* cinema, the absence of a unified ideology among the leaders of the new sociocultural front (notably, the intelligentsia) led to a period characterized by chaos and instability. The effects of the ideological vacuum created by Gorbachev’s liberalization continued into the next decade and beyond.

The final point I would like to address concerns *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein*’s budget and critical reception. Fleischmann’s film was one of the most expensive projects ever in the history of Soviet cinema, yet it was regarded as a major failure both domestically and internationally. In his article “Observing the Imperial Gaze: On Peter Fleischmann’s *Es ist nicht*

*leicht ein Gott zu sein*,” historian Matthias Schwartz claims that the film’s poor reception was symptomatic of a broader problem in late-Soviet cinema:

The making of *Es ist schwer ein Gott zu sein* (sic) tells a great deal about the downfall of the Soviet film industry and its inability to produce high-quality sf films, even though this specific film was one of the most expensive ever produced. In a way, its six-year production history provides an instructive example of the ineffectiveness of Soviet bureaucratic and ideological structures. The first international cooperation of Soviet film officials and Western art-house directors led not to an internationally appealing, highbrow sf film, but on the contrary testified to their own commercial and aesthetic insignificance. When the film was released in Mikhail Gorbachev’s Soviet Union in 1990, hardly anyone noticed it because, in the wake of Perestroika and Glasnost, previously forbidden national and international films attracted far greater audiences. Moreover, the borders soon opened for all kinds of Western films shown in video salons for a few roubles. Ironically, one of the most popular screenings at the time were the first three Rambo films (US 1982–8), starring Sylvester Stallone, and the first Star Wars trilogy (US 1977–83), that is, exactly those blockbusters to which Fleischmann tried to create a critical alternative (Schwartz 2015, 223).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s an influx of foreign cinema strangled the domestic market.

While Soviet film production was at its historical peak in 1990 (300 feature films annually), the industry was brought to a nadir by the latter half of the decade (in 1996, only 26 features were produced) (Graham 2008, 95). Thus, just as Gorbachev’s liberalization precipitated a crisis of identity, it also brought serious consequences for the artists and industries seeking to redefine “Russianness” in the post-Soviet space.

### Mikhail Bulgakov's *Rokovye iaitsa*

Mikhail Bulgakov has a complex history as a Soviet author. In 1930, the same year that he burned the first draft of his famous *Master i Margarita*, he wrote a letter detailing the criticism he received from the Soviet bureaucracy and media during the 1920s. In *Pismo k pravitel'stvu SSSR*, Bulgakov notes:

Carrying out an analysis of my album of news clippings, I discovered 301 reviews about me over the course of my ten years of literary work. Out of them: 3 were in praise of me, 298 were hostilely abusive. Those last 298 are the mirror reflection of my life as a writer (Bulgakov 1930).

Like Iakov Protazanov, who became a focal point for criticism in the late 1920s (see Chapter 1), Bulgakov was repeatedly threatened with censure by the Soviet leadership and his works were regularly criticized for their ideological improprieties. In 1925, the same year that *Rokovye iaitsa* was first printed, Maxim Gorky intervened to have Bulgakov's *Sobach'e serdtse* published after it was refused by the censors (Cornwell 1998, 103). In 1939, after Bulgakov's play *Batum* was banned by Stalin himself, the author requested permission to leave the Soviet Union (Bulgakov 1992, 264). Unfortunately, after being denied the right to emigrate, he died in the following year – leaving *Master i Margarita*, his most defining work, unfinished (ibid.).

Bulgakov's writings and dramatic life story have earned him considerable attention. As an intellectual who suffered for his refusal to bow to the demands of the Soviet censors, he has become a symbol for artistic purity in the face of a totalitarian regime – particularly among the Russian intelligentsia. Thus, it is not surprising that his texts became the source of inspiration for cinematic adaptations in the aftermath of *glasnost'* and Soviet disintegration.

Written in 1924 and first published by the *Nedra* publishing house in 1925, Mikhail Bulgakov's *Rokovye iaitsa* is a satirical allegory of post-revolutionary Russian society. Set in Moscow in 1928, the novella follows the misadventures of Professor Vladimir Ipat'evich Persikov and his discovery of a red "ray of life" (*luch zhizni*). This scientific invention is capable of drastically increasing the reproduction of cells in animals – causing them to grow in size and become exceptionally aggressive. However, the role of this fantastic device is considerably muted in Bulgakov's novella. Instead, the narrative focuses primarily on Persikov's interactions with individuals who appear as caricatures of 1920s Soviet society.

In Part One of *Rokovye iaitsa*, the protagonist is introduced in the following way:

He was fifty-eight years old. With a splendid bald head, like a pestle, and tufts of yellowish hair sticking out at the sides. His face was clean-shaven, with a slightly protruding lower lip which gave it a slightly cantankerous expression. Tall and round-shouldered, he had small bright eyes and tiny old-fashioned spectacles in silver frames on a red nose. He spoke in a grating, high, croaking voice and one of his many idiosyncrasies was to crook the index finger of his right hand and screw up his eyes, whenever he was saying something weighty and authoritative. And since he always spoke authoritatively, because his knowledge in his field was quite phenomenal, the crooked finger was frequently pointed at those with whom the Professor was conversing. Outside his field, that is, zoology, embryology, anatomy, botany and geography, however, Professor Persikov said almost nothing at all. Professor Persikov did not read the newspapers or go to the theatre (Bulgakov 1990, 113).

A scientist who prefers solitude to social relationships, Persikov is a divorcee with a dismissive attitude towards his students, colleagues, and the outside world. The description of his personality paints him as a man with a singular pursuit: scientific knowledge. However, in addition to this caricature of a member of the Soviet intelligentsia, Bulgakov also satirizes

conditions that prevailed in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution – war, starvation, and the replacement of intellectual scientists and students with members of the uneducated proletariat:

Immediately after the demise of the toads which devastated that first order of amphibians rightly called tailless, old Vlas, the Institute's caretaker of many years' standing, who did not belong to any order of amphibians, also passed on to a better world. The cause of his death, incidentally, was the same as that of the unfortunate amphibians, and Persikov diagnosed it at once: "Undernourishment!" The scientist was perfectly right. Vlas should have been fed with flour and the toads with flour weevils, but the disappearance of the former determined that of the latter likewise, and Persikov tried to shift the twenty surviving specimens of tree-frogs onto a diet of cockroaches, but then the cockroaches disappeared too, thereby demonstrating their hostile attitude to war communism. . . .

But all things come to an end. So it was with 'twenty and 'twenty-one, and in 'twenty-two a kind of reverse process began. Firstly, in place of the dear departed Vlas there appeared Pankrat, a young, but most promising zoological caretaker, and the Institute began to be heated again a little. Then in the summer with Pankrat's help Persikov caught fourteen common toads. The terrariums came to life again. . . . In 'twenty-three Persikov gave eight lectures a week, three at the Institute and five at the University, in 'twenty-four thirteen a week, not including the ones at workers' schools, and in the spring of 'twenty-five distinguished himself by failing no less than seventy-six students, all on amphibians (Bulgakov 1990, 115-116).

Following Persikov's discovery that his invention has the power to drastically increase both the size and reproduction of cells, a number of individuals representing stereotypical members of 1920s society proceed to incessantly infringe on his work. Curious locals, journalists, businessmen, political officials, and members of the GPU (forebear to the KGB) come to his home offices one after another, requesting (or, more commonly, demanding) information on the scientist's creation. Persikov's interactions with these individuals constitute the majority of the novella and create an image of a society that is greatly imperiled by its own organizational structures. The *deus ex machina* that concludes Bulgakov's narrative – an unexpected freeze that

kills off an onslaught of mutant reptiles threatening Moscow – in no way softens the blow of this biting criticism.

The most heavy-handed satirization of any character in the novella is leveled at a figure named Aleksandr Semenovich Rokk. A former revolutionary and head of the local government farm (*sovkhos*), Rokk's careless actions lead to a crisis that threatens to destroy the Soviet Union in its entirety. With the help of the secret police, he confiscates Persikov's invention and uses it to incubate what he believes to be chicken eggs – a means to ward off an ongoing plague decimating the city's poultry. However, having insufficient knowledge of agricultural science and, seemingly, a total lack of common sense, Rokk accidentally incubates eggs containing snakes, crocodiles, and ostriches. This mistake results in the death of his wife, his rapid descent into madness, and an unstoppable plague of gigantic, rapidly reproducing reptiles.

As a model of an inept bureaucrat, Rokk represents both the dangers of inexperienced leadership and a significant downside to the Soviet system of class stratification. Like Pankrat, the uneducated replacement for Vlas whom Persikov treats more as an errand boy than a colleague, Rokk does not owe his position to knowledge or experience in the field, but rather to bureaucratic nepotism. His inexperience, coupled with his powerful position, is directly responsible for the catastrophe that forms the narrative center of the work. In this way, Bulgakov creates a tongue-in-cheek criticism of the Soviet system and its relationship to both the intelligentsia and intellectualism itself.

The use of a stereotypical character to provide criticism of Soviet society is not unique to Rokk in *Rokovye iaitsa*. The hero's interactions with several other figures, including a journalist,

a wealthy businessman, and representatives of the GPU, also illustrate common contemporary issues. Alfred Bronskii, “correspondent for the Moscow magazines *Red Light*, *Red Pepper*, *Red Journal*, and *Red Searchlight*, and the newspaper *Red Moscow Evening News*,” provokes, entraps, and misrepresents Persikov for his report (Bulgakov 1990, 127). Misspelling the professor’s name and sensationalizing his experiments, Bronskii causes the wave of attention that “turn(s) Persikov's whole life upside down” (ibid.). Ultimately, his dishonest tactics and thoughtless actions catalyze the events that threaten to destroy the country. The wealthy businessman, who promises Persikov success and attempts to fund his research secretly, is revealed to be a foreign spy. This visit by an unabashed capitalist, which prompts another by the secret police, is also a significant factor in the chain of events that leads to the novella’s climax.

Two sets of GPU officers play a critical role in Bulgakov’s narrative. The first group, who come to Persikov searching for a foreign spy, may be seen as representatives of the oppressive arm of the party. Paying little interest to Persikov’s research or invention, they demand answers concerning the businessman and harass the professor about his frequent visitors. Later, under pressure to deal with the plague affecting chickens, these officers oversee the funding of Persikov’s research before inconsiderately delivering all of his equipment, without explanation, to the incompetent Rokk. As representatives of an authoritarian bureaucracy that claims full ownership of everything within its territories, their failure to understand the consequences of redistributing such a precious resource provides an unflattering reflection of historical communist practice.

The second group of agents, led by the former Red Army soldier Shchukin, presents an even darker image of Soviet hubris. After meeting the traumatized Rokk and hearing his story concerning monstrous reptiles, the officers speed off to investigate. Discovering that the creatures exist and are rapidly multiplying, they endeavor to fight them alone, ultimately dying in their attempt and leaving the plague unreported. Their thoughtless actions, while driven by bravery and a belief in their ability to succeed, allow the horde of reptiles to multiply unchecked. A satirization of Bolshevik (i.e. revolutionary) pride, these events illustrate the danger of relying on confidence in lieu of knowledge and experience.

Bulgakov's novella provides an unflattering image of Soviet civilization in the 1920s. In the presence of a phenomenal scientific achievement with the ability to free the nation from one of its greatest woes – hunger – this society became responsible for creating the circumstances of its own destruction. The fact that the Soviet army is defeated by the reptiles, only to be saved by an unexpected freeze, serves to deepen the impression of a system incapable of overcoming its own deficiencies. One could say the same thing about the death of the novella's hero at the hands of an angry mob: one which blames Persikov for the plague caused by the hapless misuse of his invention.

As a reflection of the Russian worldview in the early years of the Soviet Union, *Rokovye iaitsa* constitutes an exceptional glimpse into a nascent society from the perspective of one of its most notable detractors. Bulgakov's representation of the intelligentsia, satirization of the authoritarian bureaucracy, and commentary on the problems of early Soviet civilization made the work one of the most controversial classics of twentieth century Russian literature. Particularly



among the intelligentsia, it has served as an iconic example of artistic criticism in the face of an authoritarian regime. Presenting a chaotic and fatalistic message that offers little hope for the future, Bulgakov's novella provided an appealing model for adaptation in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### Sergei Lomkin's *Rokovye iaitsa*

In the chaos and disruption of post-Soviet Russia, the cinema industry has barely managed to exist, deprived of the state funding it once enjoyed and forced to look to private, occasionally shady, sponsors for resources. As a result, the number of films produced has sharply decreased. Yet those that are made – and some to great international acclaim – reflect a vision of Russia and explore the national experience and collective identity in a manner and style very different from the cinema of Gorbachev's glasnost a decade earlier (Gillespie 2003, 1).

Sergei Lomkin's *Rokovye iaitsa* is a model example of Russian cinema made in the middle of the chaotic 1990s. Produced in 1995 in cooperation between the famous Czech Barrandov Studios and the extremely short-lived Russian ADA-Film Studio,<sup>62</sup> it approaches the same themes featured in Bulgakov's novella from a distinctly post-Soviet perspective. Its chaotic and sardonic narrative, which integrates aspects of *Rokovye iaitsa* and *Master i Margarita*, leads to the formation of an opaque ideological message – one that is a useful window into the post-Soviet Russian worldview.

Commenting on the ideological consequences of *perestroika* and the fall of the Soviet Union, Eliot Borenstein writes:

From perestroika through the 1990s, Russian culture was caught in a state of almost permanent crisis: a free-floating but repeatedly expressed anxiety about the state of the country, its fate, its relationship with the West, the morality of its youth, and the hopeless chaos of a corrupt, criminalized society lacking in a unifying idea (Borenstein 2008, 6).

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<sup>62</sup> *Rokovye iaitsa* is the only film that the ADA-Film Studio ever produced. Like many works of Russian cinema in the 1990s, it did not receive financial support from the state. Instead, it was funded by a private holding company (in this case A&M Holdings) and partnership with a foreign studio.

Like the period of *glasnost* in the late 1980s, the disintegration of the Soviet Union had a profound effect on the development of the Russian worldview (Fitzpatrick 2005, 304). In the same way that Gorbachev's reforms increased individual freedoms – yet resulted in a period of ideological chaos – circumstances in the 1990s also bred confusion and a crisis of identity.

The shock of the early '90s had many different components. Foreign goods flooded in and were sold at first from improvised kiosks and tables in the streets. Wages and salaries collapsed, both because of inflation and because state employers were in chronic arrears in paying them. State industry was privatized, to the immense profit of a very few. Private banks arose and then, in many cases, dramatically fell, taking many citizens' savings with them. Law and order collapsed, as did most state funding of culture. Old restrictions on internal movement, residence, change of employment, and travel abroad were lifted, producing disorientation as well as liberation. Urban apartments were privatized, giving rise to the new commercial realm of "real estate" as well as all sorts of crooked deals that left substantial numbers of former apartment tenants on the street; a new term, *bomzhi* (or persons without fixed abode, *bez opredelennogo mesta zhitel'stva*), came into existence to describe a new large-scale phenomenon. Serious food shortages in the early '90s turned city-dwellers into gardeners, who grew vegetables in small plots on the outskirts of towns. Civil War in the Caucasus created a new class of refugees, in addition to the large number of Russians trying to return to central Russia from non-Russian republics or from decaying industrial settlements in the north. Rates of alcohol consumption, drug consumption, and suicide rose sharply, as life expectancy for males dropped to a degree unprecedented in a developed society in peace time. The intelligentsia, whose political influence and sense of moral authority had been peaked in the heady days of perestroika, found its very existence under threat in post-Soviet Russia as a result of drastic cutbacks in state funding of science and culture (Fitzpatrick 2005, 305).

In the aftermath of the crumbling of an empire, and in the presence of a growing number of unprecedented maladies, the Russian people struggled to identify their place in global culture. No longer "Soviet," yet inextricably linked to the Soviet past, the Russian mentality began to adapt to massive political, economic, and sociocultural changes while still reeling from the loss of its formerly identifying label. On the one hand, this led to a thoughtful reexamination of the

foundations of historical Russian, as opposed to Soviet, national identity. On the other, it opened the door to a tremendous ideological struggle concerning the future of Russian art and society in a democratic, capitalist nation.

Describing the conditions that prevailed in Russian cinema in the early 1990s, anthropologist George Faraday writes:

In the five years between the Fifth Congress and the Soviet Union's political dissolution in 1991, filmmaking was dominated by attempts to violate both the thematic and formal orthodoxies of Soviet-era cinema. Previously taboo subjects such as prostitution, youth violence, and drug abuse were presented in styles that ranged from the brutally naturalistic to the brutally grotesque. In the early 1990s, however, something of a reaction to the "dark cinema" (*chernukha*) of perestroika set in, resulting in a move toward what I term *national popular* cinema, in which the dominant theme was the reaffirmation of national identity rather than the deconstruction of official Soviet representations of society (Faraday 2000, 159).

"National popular" cinema, which gradually replaced the bleaker *chernukha*, became a model for the type of films that would be produced throughout the latter half of the decade and beyond (Norris 4, 2012). However, the directors and producers of these films gradually became separated into two ideologically opposing camps: the "commercialists" and the "aesthetes" (Faraday 2000, 163). The commercialists, who sought to entertain a broad viewership, turned to popular American models to create exciting – but ideologically vapid – works. The aesthetes, on the other hand, sought to emulate the model of auteur artists like Tarkovskii, Sherstobitov, and Sokurov to create stylistically complex films aimed primarily at the intelligentsia. The struggle between these two camps, in addition to the presence of competition from foreign cinema, created the circumstances for a massive decline in film production over the course of the decade. According to film historian Stephen Graham:

The cultural arena in Russia has long been the site of struggles over the right to define and/or create normative models of collective identity. This has been particularly true when other venues of expression, for example the political or the journalistic, have suffered from grave shortages of credibility or professionalism. Post-Soviet Russian cinema, of course, has experienced its own myriad of deficits. Works on the topic (especially in English) typically begin with a litany of production statistics that quantify those deficits: from an all-time high of 300 feature films produced in the USSR in 1990, domestic annual production quickly plummeted to the double digits, where it lingers still. The low point was in 1996, when 28 Russian features were produced. Annual numbers for the first six years of the new millennium were in the 60s (Graham 2008, 95).

In the fight for both resources and prestige among the Russian public, the opposition between these groups – one which continued to create mindless pseudo-blockbusters and the other films that became increasingly inaccessible to the average viewer – stunted the development of national cinema as a whole (Faraday 2000, 163).

In the midst of this struggle between commercialists and aesthetes, Sergei Lomkin's *Rokovye iaitsa* employs a strategy that may be viewed as a deft compromise. Managing to bridge the gap between over-intellectualization and mindless entertainment, it cleverly combines some of the most valuable aspects of each representative camp without approaching the extremes of either. As such, it is a noteworthy predecessor to the national popular cinema that would revive the Russian film industry in the new millennium, as well as those films produced in the second half of the 1990s that came to be considered classics of the decade – including *Kavkazskii plennik* (1996), *Brat* (1997), and *Sibirskii tsiriul'nik* (1998).

It is difficult to describe the plot of Lomkin's film in a linear fashion. Chaotically jumping from scene to scene, there are a number of awkward tangents that seem completely disconnected from the primary narrative. Furthermore, as with Aleksei Tolstoi's *Aelita*, the

viewer often has to reconsider earlier events of the film in order to understand essential aspects of the plot as it develops. Therefore, before beginning my analysis, I will attempt to provide a straightforward description of the principal characters and episodes.

*Rokovye iaitsa* opens with Professor Persikov asleep in bed. Thereafter, a quintet of shadowy horsemen fly through the clouds before firing a ray of red light from a magical sword into the scientist's microscope. These horseman, later revealed to be the diabolic Voland and his group of faithful miscreants from Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita*, set in motion the chain of events that leads to the film's principal catastrophe. The addition of these characters, as we shall see, has a profound effect on the development of the film's message.

Waking up to a beautiful wife begging for attention, Persikov rushes off to the institute to check on his ongoing experiments. In a parallel development, a group of doctors attempt to capture Rokk as he joyfully plays a flute on the roof of a psychiatric facility. Thereafter, viewers are introduced to Mikhail Semenovich (head of the secret police and comedic stand-in for Lenin) and his awkwardly-dressed GPU officers. As the former has his head shaved and massaged, the officers inform him of a plague that is killing chickens across the country. In response, he orders that Rokk, interned to the asylum under his own orders, be released and put in charge of dealing with the epidemic.

Arriving at the asylum, the officers demand the release of Rokk into their custody. The former bureaucrat initially refuses to leave the ward, but is convinced by his wife to return to his position as head of the state farm. Meanwhile, Professor Persikov and his young colleagues, Pankrat and Ivanov, make an amazing discovery. Arranging a series of mirrors and lenses in

their laboratory, they find that they have the ability to create a ray of light that drastically increases the growth of biological cells. After celebrating the new discovery with his colleagues, Persikov returns home to find that his wife is preparing to leave him. Furious at the professor's neglectful behavior and obsession with his work, she abandons him for a wealthy singer with whom she had been having an affair. Before doing so, however, she removes one of Persikov's prized toads from its terrarium and sets it free in the apartment. The professor, unfazed by his wife's betrayal, demands to know where she has left the toad but makes no effort to convince her to stay.

On a rainy day in Moscow, Persikov walks out into a pond with the prized toad in his hands. His melancholy demeanor indicates that he intends to kill himself. However, as he slowly wades into the water, Voland intervenes, informing the professor that his colleagues are searching for him. Pankrat appears and tells Persikov that their office has been overrun by hundreds of overgrown amphibians. Returning to the institute, the scientists eradicate the monstrous toads with poison gas, all the while discussing the ramifications of their new discovery. According to Ivanov, these hyper-aggressive creatures are a product of their "ray of life" (Lomkin 1995).

The following day Persikov is overwhelmed by journalists seeking information about his invention. Attempting to rid himself of their presence, Persikov leaves the institute only to discover that the newspapers have already printed wild fabrications regarding his experiments. A film crew follows the professor as he travels home and, when he arrives, he finds yet another journalist waiting there. Demanding to know why the papers are printing libelous stories, he is

interrupted by a group of gypsy performers that force their way into his home and begin playing songs and offering gifts. Falling ill on account of the chaos, Persikov passes out, only to be awoken by the arrival of a monocled businessman hours later.

Offering the professor American dollars to support his research, the businessman tells Persikov that news of his discovery has spread around the world. After demanding that he leave, Persikov calls the police to report the visitor's offer. Moments later, the trio of GPU officers responsible for releasing Rokk appear. After an interrogation, the officers inform Persikov that he will no longer be bothered by visitors to either his home or office. The next day, however, Rokk and a number of workers arrive at the institute and begin removing Persikov's inventions. Demanding to know the reason for this unexpected intrusion, Persikov is informed that his devices are being sent to the government farm to battle a poultry epidemic plaguing the country. Despite the professor's protests, Rokk removes all but one of the devices and relocates them to a dilapidated shack on the state farm.

Arriving at a cargo distribution post, Rokk requests a crate of chicken eggs for his plan to stop the plague. However, instead of taking the one allotted to him, he decides to steal a crate destined for Persikov's office. Unbeknownst to him, this crate is filled with eggs containing anacondas, crocodiles, and ostriches. When he and his fellow workers open it, they discover grotesquely oversized orbs that bear little resemblance to common chicken eggs. Nonetheless, after drinking one in attempt to test its quality, Rokk decides to place them under Persikov's ray for incubation. Meanwhile, at the institute, the scientists mourn the loss of their equipment and discuss possible complications that might arise from using their ray on chicken embryos.



The next morning, as Rokk plays in a fountain with his wife, a messenger comes to inform him that the incubation chamber has been emptied. Running to the shack, Rokk discovers two chambers of hatched eggs, but no sign of the chickens. Distraught by this loss, he and his fellow workers are comforted by the fact that one chamber of eggs has yet to hatch. Meanwhile, Persikov reacts angrily when his colleagues discover that a crate delivered to the institute contains common chicken eggs. Nonetheless, using their remaining instruments, the scientists succeed in adapting the ray to rapidly multiply baby chickens – effectively solving the problem that Rokk was ordered to address.

Searching for his lost chicks in the woods, Rokk comes across a giant snake that rises up to tower over the trees. Terrified by this apparition, he begins to play a flute in attempt to lull the creature into sleep. Just as the snake begins to settle, however, Rokk's wife shouts for him to join her in the river. Frozen in fear, Rokk watches as the snake violently strangles and eats her. Finding Rokk in a state of madness, GPU officer Shchukin and his partner listen to his story but disregard it as a mere hallucination. Nonetheless, they arm themselves and speed off in a military vehicle to investigate. When they arrive at the state farm, however, they find it abandoned. Ignoring his partner's advice to call for help, Shchukin demands that they press on alone. Making their way to the shack, they find that dozens of giant snakes have made it their home. In a panic, the officers fire their weapons at the reptiles but are violently killed by a crocodile and anaconda.

At the institute, Persikov and his colleagues receive another crate of chicken eggs and realize that the rumored giant reptiles in the news were hatched from their misplaced specimens.

Meanwhile, Persikov's wife is abandoned by her new lover in a rush to leave the city. When Persikov finds her in the street, she is accompanied by two officers who immediately arrest him. Arriving at a meeting with the head of the GPU, Persikov is honored as a scientist of the people and given a watch to symbolize his status. After the head of the GPU explains his plan to push the creatures into isolation, Persikov is sent off in a car to be taken to a safe location. Along the way, however, the car breaks down and Persikov wanders into the streets. As he does so, pandemonium breaks out as rioters and gangs of bandits loot the city and attack anyone who attempts to interfere.

After stopping at home to feed his prized toad, Persikov returns to the institute. While he sits in contemplation, an angry mob breaks into the laboratory looking for him. However, they fail to notice the professor and rush into the offices, destroying all of the equipment and killing Pankrat instead. When they come across Ivanov, he sprays the poison gas used earlier to quell the onslaught of toads, incapacitating himself and a room full of rioters in the process. Persikov, still unrecognized, is stabbed to death when he refuses to hand over his new watch to a passing bandit. Meanwhile, as the rioters break into Persikov's personal office, they find Voland there waiting. After a short and enigmatic monologue, Voland jumps from the window into the sky. Following after him, several people plummet to their deaths from the elevated window. In the wake of all this destruction, a voiceless narrator delivers a closing monologue. Explaining that the onslaught of reptiles was destroyed by a sudden freeze, he describes how the secret to Persikov's ray of life died with him. The film ends with a scene featuring Voland and his retinue flying across the clouds on horseback.

The narrative that I have described is disjointed and difficult to follow. The rapid transitions between scenes, complex cinematic techniques, and seemingly unrelated narrative tangents create an impression of chaos in the viewer's mind that is a subconscious reaction to the film's structure. Following in the footsteps of *auteur* directors like Andrei Tarkovskii, Evgenii Sherstobitov, and Aleksandr Sokurov, Lomkin's adaptation may be considered among the films favored by the aesthetes in 1990s cinematic culture. However, from another perspective, many of the primary features of *Rokovye iaitsa* are evidently commercialist – aimed at little more than entertaining a broad audience.

The primary advantage of Lomkin's filmmaking strategy is that *Rokovye iaitsa* may be viewed as both a farcical fantastic comedy and a fatalistic satirical allegory. On the one hand, the work is layered with comedic dialogue, impressive special effects, and scenes designed to appeal to even the most uneducated viewer. One scene that takes place in Rokk's incubation shack, for example, portrays a group of workers comically pacing the room repeating "tsip, tsip, tsip" – calling to chickens that are obviously not present. Another, featuring an animatronic anaconda and crocodile, provides an awe-inspiring impression of Bulgakov's gargantuan reptiles: one that is quite evidently inspired by Hollywood models. On the other hand, however, the complex satire, rapid transitions, and disunifying narrative tangents allow for a deeper understanding of the film on an intellectual level. The thoughtless disregard for protocol and safety exhibited by former Red Officer Shchukin, for instance, may be viewed as a criticism of Soviet hubris (similar to that in Bulgakov's novella). Rokk's introduction as a patient of an insane asylum, interred by his own fellow revolutionaries only to be released in a moment of crisis, may be seen

as an indictment of the Stagnation-era policy of placing undesirable members of society into mental wards regardless of their state of mind. Furthermore, a tangential scene – featuring a group of women dancing naked around a fire in a paganistic ritual – may be understood either as a commentary on the rapid proliferation of non-traditional religions and spiritualism that took place in the first decade of the post-Soviet era (Stephens 1997, 358), or simply as a criticism of the lawlessness of contemporary society in a nation lacking a common ideal.

From one perspective, *Rokovye iaitsa* is a comedy with fantastic elements. Entertaining the viewer with a fast-paced narrative and amusing situations drawn from everyday life, it does not necessarily concern itself with expressing a distinct ideological message. Considered from a more sophisticated perspective, however, *Rokovye iaitsa* is a fatalistic satirical allegory. Drawing parallels between the early years of the Soviet Union and those of the Russian Federation, Lomkin provides a sardonic critique of contemporary conditions and sociocultural trends. Rokk's relocation of Persikov's equipment and theft of the reptilian eggs, for instance, is a rather tongue-in-cheek criticism of the post-Soviet method of property redistribution. Persikov's pointless murder at the hands of a random bandit, moreover, could be considered a reflection of the lawlessness that characterized Russian society in the aftermath of Soviet dissolution. Furthermore, with the introduction of a comedic caricature of Lenin – one that would have been undoubtedly banned in the cinema of the 1980s – Lomkin's film promotes a rather flippant attitude to Soviet power: a telling reflection of an inversion in the relationship between the government and the people in the post-Soviet sociocultural space.

The introduction of Volland, Begemot, and Gella from Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita* also has a profound effect on our understanding of the film's message. Regularly appearing at crucial moments, these characters guide the hero and others on their path to destruction and are ultimately responsible for the calamity that unfolds. Volland appears just as Persikov prepares to commit suicide, Begemot passes an enigmatic message to Ivanov at an opportune moment, Gella incites the riots that lead to the institute's destruction and the murder of Pankrat, and another (uncredited) member of the retinue is present when Rokk decides to steal the reptilian eggs. In shifting part of the blame for the narrative's catastrophe onto this retinue of mystical "others," Lomkin's *Rokovye iaitsa* develops a watered-down version of Bulgakov's satirization of post-Revolutionary Russian society. That is, rather than placing blame exclusively on the foolishness of Rokk, the GPU, reporters, or Persikov, Lomkin's narrative paints the events as something inspired by an alien presence in the city.

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the foundational narratives of Russian identity is based on a fundamental separation between "us" (the Russian people) and "them" (the inhabitants of Western nations). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a long-standing ideological barrier between Russia and the West (i.e. Soviet socialism) was shattered, creating a gap in this distinction. As Russia transitioned to free market capitalism and democracy, it became almost impossible to distinguish "our" Russian ideas from those borrowed from foreign cultures. Influences from abroad overwhelmed the sociocultural sphere, causing problems and raising issues that had never before been widely addressed in Russian society (Fitzpatrick 2005, 305). Like the mythical characters borrowed from Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita*, one could say

that foreign influences guided (or, more aptly, pushed) Russia into a state of chaos and despair. Viewed as an allegory for Russian culture in the mid-1990s, therefore, Lomkin's film develops a message contrary to that of its literary source. That is, rather than framing the film's central catastrophe as a direct consequence of the incompetence, hubris, and ignorance of society's most defining members, the narrative of *Rokovye iaitsa* shifts blame to uncontrollable outside forces. As a glimpse into the historical narrative of "us" versus "them," this feature of Lomkin's film provides an invaluable reflection of the post-Soviet worldview. It expresses a perspective that exculpates the Russian people, instead placing responsibility for contemporary woes on external (e.g. foreign) influences.

In creating a film that could appeal to both the aesthetic and popular demands of the Russian viewer, Lomkin's adaptation may be viewed as a notable step forward for post-Soviet cinema. Eschewing grounded moral and ethical messages, it expresses a perspective that paints enigmatic outside influences as a significant danger to modern society. As a reflection of the Russian worldview in the context of the chaotic 1990s, it illustrates an out-of-control society in the presence of unmanageable circumstances and incalculable foreign influence. As I will show in my examination of Viktor Pelevin's *Generation 'P'* and Sergei Lukianenko's *Nochnoi dozor*, this perspective became a common feature of Russian *fantastika* literature in the latter half of the decade.

## **Twenty-First-Century Russian *Fantastika*: Dialogues on Identity in the Putin Era**

In the late 1990s, Russia was still reeling from the cultural instability caused by Gorbachev's reforms, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the transition to democracy and a market economy. A series of monumental changes in the political, economic, and sociocultural landscapes over the course of the decade bred volatility, and there was a general lack of agreement on the core features of Russian identity in the post-Soviet space. The liberalization of the cultural arena, however, considerably emboldened artists, many of whom chose to approach contemporary topics from a critical perspective.<sup>63</sup> The opening up of the sociocultural sphere, initiated by Gorbachev and continued under Yeltsin, set the stage for a thoughtful reevaluation of Russian identity in the twenty-first century.

It is difficult to discuss the topic of contemporary Russian civilization without regular reference to Vladimir Putin and policies enacted by the United Russia political party. Putin is an unmistakably influential figure, and it is clear that the policies enacted under his leadership have transformed the sociocultural conditions of the Russian Federation. However, although the long-time leader has ushered in popular economic, political, and social changes (evidenced by a consistently high domestic approval rating) and enjoys a well-developed cult of personality (Wegren 2019, 4-5), it is dangerous to overemphasize his role in the evolution of twenty-first-

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<sup>63</sup> According to Birgit Beumers, "Afghanistan and Chechnya became settings for films that explored the roots of identity and the troubles of war (e.g. *Kavkazskii plennik*, *Musel'manin*, *Blokpost*), and crime and gangster culture – a now irrefutable aspect of Russian society – became a central theme of post-Soviet cinema (e.g. *Brat*, *Sestri*, *Antikiller*)" (Beumers 2009, 234).

century Russian identity. Thus, while I refer to the sixth period of *fantastika* film adaptation as the “Putin era,” my research has indicated that, as in previous periods, the evolution of the Russian worldview in the twenty-first century was influenced by a complex amalgamation of sociocultural forces – many of which were entirely disconnected from political concerns or government policies.

An exploration of eight *fantastika* film adaptations and their corresponding literary sources will illuminate notable transformations in perceptions of Russian identity in the period from 2000-2017. The films that I discuss – *Nochnoi dozor* (2004) and *Dnevnoi dozor* (2006), *Gadkie lebedi* (2006), *Obitaemyi ostrov* (2008) and *Obitaemyi ostrov: skhvatka* (2009), *Generation P* (2011), *Trudno byt' bogom* (2013) and *On drakon* (2015) – are iconic examples of twenty-first-century Russian cinema.



### Sergei Lukianenko's *Nochnoi Dozor*

Irrationally. I'm acting irrationally. If there's no ethically right solution – act irrationally. Did someone tell me that? Have I just remembered a line from my old course notes, a phrase from a lecture? Or am I looking for excuses? – Anton Gorodetskii

Written between 1998 and 2014, Sergei Lukianenko's *Dozor* ("Watch") hexalogy is a crucial source in the quest for a deeper understanding of Russian cultural identity in the twenty-first century. Viewed as a whole, it is both a complex commentary on the post-Soviet experience and a vivid illustration of a contemporary Russian author's ability to compete in the globalized market. A *fantastika* series that has become a national cult classic, I consider it a critical resource for future research. However, because both of Timur Bekmambetov's film adaptations (*Nochnoi dozor* and the misleadingly labeled *Dnevnoi dozor*)<sup>64</sup> are based on events that take place in the first novel of the series, I will focus exclusively on this groundbreaking text.

First published by AST Publishers in 1998, *Nochnoi dozor* portrays a world in which a magical reality – the Twilight (*Sumrak*)<sup>65</sup> – exists beneath the surface of all things. Individuals with supernatural abilities, referred to as "Others" and separated into forces of Darkness and Light, influence both daily life and global events through the use of special gifts. Successfully blending in to urban Moscow, the Night Watch is an organization designed to police "Dark Others" and maintain balance in a global battle between good and evil that has its roots in

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<sup>64</sup> Contrary to marketing, Bekmambetov's *Dnevnoi dozor* is actually based on the second half of Lukianenko's *Nochnoi dozor*, rather than the second novel in the hexalogy (entitled *Dnevnoi dozor*).

<sup>65</sup> Certain nouns and descriptors are capitalized in Lukianenko's text ("Other," "Twilight," "Dark Mage," etc.), as well as in Andrew Bromfield's popular translation. For the sake of consistency with citations, I have attempted to maintain the form of capitalization used in the Bromfield translation.

antediluvian history. Anton Gorodetskii, the novel's principal protagonist, experiences the events of the narrative from the perspective of a young Night Watch agent.

Juxtapositions of good versus evil, past versus present, and the individual versus the collective are ubiquitous in Lukianenko's work. Advocating for Light and Darkness respectively, the Night Watch and Day Watch organizations vie for power within the limitations of an ancient agreement: for every act of good, an equal act of evil is required (and vice versa). However, while the stipulations that determine each individual's place in this Dark/Light binary are based in ethics and morality,<sup>66</sup> many of the characters in *Nochnoi dozor* act in opposition to the interests of their respective camps. The vampires, warlocks, witches, magicians, shapeshifters, and other fantastical beings who populate the narrative operate based on personal motivations, rather than their predetermined moral proclivities.

In the context of 1990s Russian cultural history, one of the most notable features of *Nochnoi dozor* is its emphasis on the individual conscience and personal responsibility. Viewed as an allegory for contemporary civilization, it expresses a perspective that is a direct challenge to the vapid, relativistic ideology characteristic of 1990s *chernukha*. Thus, while one might say that *Nochnoi dozor* is superficially defined by its dualistic, pseudo-Manichaeian nature, the novel's underlying message is expressed through regular violations of the boundaries between good and evil, Light and Darkness. In this way, Lukianenko draws attention to the chauvinistic structures of the modern world (e.g. governments, religions, gangs, etc.) before undermining

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<sup>66</sup> In Lukianenko's mythology, Others both choose and are chosen by either Darkness or Light. A dominating theme in *Nochnoi dozor* (which is undermined in books five and six of the hexalogy) is that an Other cannot change sides after choosing an affiliation, regardless of their actions or preferences.

their legitimacy by illustrating the unpredictability of their most important individual pieces: that is, their people. As a result, he creates a contrast between collectivist and individualist ideology that paints the former as naturally inferior.

The underlying message of *Nochnoi dozor* is relatively straightforward, but it is developed in a stylistically peculiar way. At first establishing a simple, yet universal, ideological frame, the author proceeds to dismantle that frame and recreate from its parts a system of ethics centered on individual choice. He takes an abstract concept of right and wrong and challenges it by illustrating the complications it causes in the lives of “real” people (i.e. his characters). Here is a brief summary of *Nochnoi dozor*’s plot.

Anton’s duties as a Night Watch agent force him to make difficult ethical decisions that have serious consequences in his personal life. In the beginning of Book 1,<sup>67</sup> he is assigned a mission to track a duo of vampires suspected of hunting humans without a license. While following a child caught in a vampire’s spell (later revealed to be his estranged son, Egor), he is distracted by the sight of a woman (Svetlana) with a colossal vortex of energy projected above her. Attempting to rid her of this ominous phenomenon, he exhausts the power of a magical amulet given him to subdue the rogue vampires. Consequently, Anton is later forced to kill one of the suspects in the struggle to arrest them – putting himself in the crosshairs of Zavulon, the powerful head of the Day Watch.

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<sup>67</sup> Lukianenko breaks his novel into three “histories” (e.g. “*Istoriia pervaiia*,” “*Istoriia vtoraiia*,”), each with a title, prologue, and numbered chapters. I have chosen to use the term “book” instead of “history” for the sake of clarity.

Anton's attempt to save both Svetlana and Egor puts him in a position where he must kill a fellow Other. His use of the magical amulet in an unsanctioned mission, while noble in its intention, forces him to commit a morally questionable act (i.e. murder for good). However, while the Night Watch asserts his innocence in the vampire's killing, Anton struggles internally with the virtue of his decision. As I will show in my analysis, this type of ethical ambiguity is ubiquitous in Lukianenko's narrative. Time and time again, readers are forced to question the ethics of the characters' actions against the backdrop of the author's (superficially) dualistic world.

Anton's encounter with the vampires motivates the head of the Night Watch, Geser (a.k.a. Boris Ignatievich), to assign a shapeshifting magician named Olga to watch over him. However, in spite of orders to keep a low profile, Anton foolishly uses his powers to illegally alter a man's morality – sparking a fight with a Dark Other named Alisa. To settle their disagreement, Anton offers her a pass to use one minor illegal spell without repercussion. As we later learn, Anton's selfless act of good, while seemingly inconsequential, ultimately results in his son Egor's turn toward the Darkness.

In another episode, Anton discovers that Svetlana is an unaware Other<sup>68</sup> who has unknowingly cursed herself: taking the blame her mother's death and inadvertently turning the resulting negative energy into a dangerous vortex. With the help of Olga (who speaks to him telepathically), Anton helps to alleviate Svetlana's feelings of guilt by lending a sympathetic ear.

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<sup>68</sup> In Lukianenko's world, there are a number of adult Others who are unaware of their abilities and the existence of the Watch organizations. They are referred to as "unaware Others."

In the process, he succeeds in shrinking the vortex to a manageable size and releasing Svetlana from her destructive curse. This act of kindness on the part of Anton – which he performs without the use of magic – is the first in a series of actions that lead to a special bond between him and Svetlana. As if rewarded by an unknown cosmic force,<sup>69</sup> Anton is blessed for his empathetic, purely human (as opposed to supernatural) approach to helping someone in need.

While talking to Svetlana, Anton learns that the surviving suspect from his fatal encounter (a vampiress)<sup>70</sup> has kidnapped Egor and is demanding his presence on the roof of an apartment complex. When Anton arrives with other members of the Night Watch, they are immediately attacked by Zavulon and a group of Dark Others. A lengthy battle ensues, involving shapeshifting, sorcery, magic weapons, and a surprise entrance by Geser. In the midst of this struggle between forces of Darkness and Light, Egor accidentally slips into a deeper level of the Twilight. Anton follows into this dangerous secondary dimension and ultimately saves his son's life. However, in an argument about the boy's future place in the Dark/Light binary, Alisa uses a minor illegal curse – forcing Anton to “speak the truth” about the Watch organizations. Anton's revelation, which is crucial to an understanding of Lukianenko's message, is as follows:

“A complex maneuver,” I said, glancing at Boris Ignatievich. “From both sides. The Day Watch sacrifices its pawns, and the Night Watch does the same. For the great

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<sup>69</sup> As I discuss later in my analysis, it is very difficult to come up with an adequate label for this force. Because Dark/Light, good/evil have so many connotations in the modern reader's mind, it is linguistically difficult to explain a phenomenon that supersedes but also contains them. One might call this force “god,” but only in a sense that it enforces a system of justice that often appears odd or “unknowable” to human beings – there is no evidence that a sentient god exists in Lukianenko's universe. Rather, it is some type of unidentified cosmic force that rewards or punishes the characters based on their actions. The fact that it often does so in contravention of the conventions of traditional binary religious (or political) paradigms is central to Lukianenko's criticism of collectivist ideology.

<sup>70</sup> “Vampiress” (*vampirsha*) is a common term in both Western and Russian science fiction meaning “female vampire.”

goal. In order to win over to their side a sorceress of immense, unprecedented power, a young vampire who is longing for love may die. A little kid with feeble powers may disappear forever in the Twilight. Operatives may be hurt. But there's an end that justifies the means. Two great magicians who have opposed each other for hundreds of years cook up another little war. And the Light Magician is in the toughest spot . . . he has to stake everything. And for him to lose is more than just an inconvenience; it's a step into the Twilight, into the Twilight forever. But still he stakes everyone's lives. His own side's and the other's. Right, Boris Ignatievich?" (Lukyanenko 2006, 171).

Anton's "truthful" explanation paints a picture of two eternally warring clans controlled by leaders disinterested in the fates of their individual members. From Anton's point of view, he and other non-elite members of the Watch organizations are treated as pawns in a game of chess: they are expendable in pursuit of an advantage. Moreover, while the Night Watch ostensibly stands for good and the Day Watch for evil, both groups are guilty of employing a philosophy of "the end justifies the means." The choice between Darkness and Light, therefore, is less of a personal moral decision and more of an arbitrary allegiance to a gang-like social structure. Alisa's use of her token spell succeeds in driving Egor towards the Darkness by underscoring the Night Watch's hypocrisy: they claim to stand for goodness and purity, yet they willingly sanction and even commit acts of evil in pursuit of their goals.

Following Anton's revelation, Zavulon and his minions accept an offer to end the fight in a stalemate. As the Dark Others collect themselves and begin to depart, however, Anton shoots and badly injures the vampiress responsible for kidnapping Egor. His colleagues admonish him for breaking the truce. But when Anton takes aim at the vampiress again, his neighbor – a young vampire named Kostia – shields her with his body. Anton's reaction to this unexpected intervention vividly illustrates the novel's complex system of morality.

I couldn't fire at Kostya. I stood there, looking at the young vampire who lived in the apartment above me. The vampire's eyes were trained directly on me. How long had you been sneaking around after me, my friend and enemy? And what for — to save your fellow vampire or to prevent me from taking a step that would make me your mortal enemy? I shrugged and stuck the revolver into my belt (Lukyanenko 2006, 173).

A personal desire for vengeance drives Anton to attempt an extrajudicial killing in the presence of both his enemies and superiors, but a fear of damaging his relationship with Kostia dissuades him from completing the act. That is, Anton – a Light Other – acts out violently, illegally, and with evil intent against someone who has caused him personal harm; whereas Kostia – a Dark Other – acts to defend a woman he does not know in order to save her and, consequently, his relationship with Anton. The foundational basis of the Dark/Light paradigm is undermined, creating an image of right and wrong that has little to do with the characters' group affiliations. Notably, while Anton's decision to have mercy on the vampiress is an ethical choice befitting a Light Other, his motivations are based on personal emotions, rather than his moral associations.

This episode concludes the first book of *Nochnoi dozor* and is essential to an understanding of its underlying message. In Lukianenko's world, individuals act based on personal motivations, often in opposition to both the interests and moral standards of their respective camps. The good commit both minor and heinous crimes, while the bad often behave admirably from an ethical perspective. However, rather than developing a worldview based on moral relativism (as many writers and directors of *chernukha* had done at the end of the twentieth century), Lukianenko's narrative illustrates a profound ideological point: responsibility

for one's actions lies solely with the individual.<sup>71</sup> According to this perspective, the existence of free will and universal justice ensures that each person must ultimately face the repercussions of his or her personal decisions. Thus, Anton's choice to illegally alter a man's morality results in Alisa's subsequently legal use of a spell to lure Egor toward the Darkness; whereas his choice to spare the vampiress results in a strengthened friendship with his neighbor and admiration from his colleagues.

In Book Two, Lukianenko further challenges the foundations of the symbolic Dark/Light paradigm by building on the theme of personal responsibility and introducing a critical new element: the Inquisitor. Maksim, an unaware Light Other, uses his powers to hunt and kill Dark Others as a vigilante. Anton, the only magician with no alibi for the murders, is named chief suspect by the Day Watch. For his protection, Olga and Anton switch bodies, providing an alibi should any other killings occur. Anton is also put in the care of Svetlana, who has joined the Night Watch as a powerful Light Witch. While Anton is in disguise as Olga and under orders not to reveal himself, Svetlana confesses her love for him. Her feelings of love turn to anger and shame when Anton decides to tell her the truth, but she is comforted by the fact that he chose to be honest with her against Geser's orders. As in Book One, Anton makes a choice to disregard the orders of his supervisor (and, theoretically, moral superior) because it conflicts with his

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<sup>71</sup> The issue of Others vs. Humans is not well developed in *Nochnoi dozor*. There are no named Human characters, and non-Others appear to have no agency in the novel. In *Nochnoi dozor*, Humans are only mentioned when being acted upon by Others (Anton drains their energy, the vortex causes casualties in an apartment complex, etc.). Moreover, Jesus, Stalin, Chingiz Khan, and virtually every major figure in history was an Other: this is a consistent theme. Humans, in a sense, represent a portion of the population that has no control over their lives or destiny. Thus, human beings don't figure into the equation at all, and the "ideological point" that I have described applies only to Others; the reader is left to extrapolate the legitimacy of this point with respect to human beings in the real world.



personal sense of right and wrong. In this case, however, the result of his disobedience is not a punishment, but rather a budding romantic relationship. The universe rewards Anton for embracing his conscience and acting in contravention to the requirements of his “moral” profession.

While Anton and Svetlana share a romantic meal in a restaurant, the vigilante Maksim secretly follows a Dark Other into the bathroom and kills him. When the crime is discovered, both Geser and Zavulon appear, the latter implicating Anton as the guilty party. Zavulon’s accusation forces Anton to abandon his disguise and go on the run. Constantly fleeing or battling with Dark Others who attempt to arrest him, the hero begins to leave a trail of crime in his wake comparable to that left by Maksim. Encountering a Dark Magician in the metro, Anton shoots him to death, then steals his likeness to use as a disguise. At Ostankino Tower, he is discovered by another Dark Other and again forced to fight for his life, narrowly surviving a fatal duel by dropping his enemy through the building’s glass floor. Anton also uses his powers to illegally turn a human to the Light, but, experiencing inner turmoil concerning his recent actions, he decides to return the man to a neutral moral stance. His reasoning, which is at the same time simple and profound, serves to underscore Lukianenko’s message of personal freedom and responsibility: “It’s so easy to turn people to the Light or Darkness, but they’re happiest of all when they’re allowed to be themselves” (Lukyanenko 2006, 294).

As Anton evades capture, he begins to suspect that Zavulon has been sacrificing unwanted Day Watch members in order to (further) incriminate him. Deciding that his only hope lies in finding the real murderer, “a self-appointed paladin of the Light who’d sown as much evil

as a dozen werewolves or vampires,” the hero solicits help from colleagues at the Night Watch (Lukyanenko 2006, 324). Unbeknownst to Anton, however, Maksim has again gone on the hunt. To the vigilante’s surprise, he discovers that the Dark Other he is tracking is a child – Egor. Showing signs of internal struggle, Maksim gathers himself and prepares to kill the boy, but is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Anton.

Explaining that Egor’s fate in an ongoing battle between Darkness and Light is still undecided, Anton attempts to convince Maksim to leave the boy alone. However, mistrusting Anton’s words and viewing his lack of an evil aura as a form of Dark trickery, Maksim refuses to abandon his self-assigned mission. He fights Anton in the Twilight, ultimately wounding the hero with a magical knife designed to kill Dark Others. When Maksim sees that his enemy is immune to the weapon’s magic, however, he realizes that Anton is telling the truth concerning his affiliations with the Light. At this moment, Egor steps in to protect Anton, performing an act of good just as his association with the Darkness was becoming irreversible. Maksim, still sensing a minor evil presence in the boy, again attempts to kill him but is interrupted by another sudden appearance – this time by the powerful head of the Night Watch.

Geser explains that Maksim is a future “Inquisitor” – a being responsible for doling out justice to both humanity and the Watch organizations. To pacify the assailant, he says:

I don’t think you need to worry. . . . If you were an ordinary poacher, the Tribunal would have you executed – you’ve got too much blood on your hands, and the Tribunal is obliged to maintain a balance. But you’re magnificent, Maxim. They can’t afford to just toss someone like you away. You’ll be set above us all, above Light and Darkness, and it won’t even matter which side you came from. But don’t get your hopes up. That isn’t power. It’s hard labor. Drop the Dagger! (Lukyanenko 2006, 326).

Maksim relents and drops his weapon, allowing Anton and Egor to go free. As Anton begins to celebrate victory over the Darkness, however, Geser makes a stunning confession. The mission to track down Maksim, which was purportedly put into action to exculpate Anton and bring a murderer to justice, was nothing more than a training exercise for the Night Watch's newest member – Svetlana. Revealing that the powerful sorceress had witnessed the Twilight battle and refrained from taking part, even after Anton was stabbed, Geser praises Svetlana for using restraint and congratulates her on a mission accomplished.

Book Two reinforces and expands on the theme of personal responsibility developed in Book One, but also features a crucial innovation. On the one hand it is evident that, just as Anton claimed in his (forced) revelation, both Geser and Zavulon are guilty of sacrificing pawns in their efforts to gain dominance over the other. Light and Dark Others suffered and died as a result of the leaders' orders, unaware that their sacrifice was part of an operation that amounted to little more than a training exercise. Furthermore, while some Others follow their superiors blindly, others regularly disregard or disobey orders, operating instead based on personal feelings and beliefs. Maksim's decision to hunt Others, Anton's decision to reveal himself to Svetlana, and Egor's decision to defend Anton are all examples of choices made based on personal motivations.

On the other hand, the introduction of the Inquisitor (and, by extension, the Inquisition) has a profound effect on our understanding of the novel's message. Notably, the very fact that there are adult Others who exist beyond the scope of Darkness and Light forces a reconsideration of *Nochnoi dozor*'s seemingly dualistic world. That is, if there are Others who maintain the

balance between good and evil, yet exist above it, the purpose of war between the Day Watch and Night Watch factions becomes questionable. Further undermining the Dark/Light paradigm, Lukianenko's Inquisitor forces readers to question whether the Watch organizations are necessary at all. Moreover, while *Nochnoi dozor* features characters who regularly act based on personal motivations, Maksim stands out as the only individual who relies exclusively on his conscience in moral and ethical concerns. This "unaffiliated" Other, who has committed heinous acts of his own accord in the service of good, is made judge over all beings.

Book Three further develops the theme of personal responsibility and compounds it with a domestic element.<sup>72</sup> The Night Watch, under orders from Geser, travels to the countryside to relax after a particularly arduous period of work. Anton, experiencing a moment of rest for the first time in years, begins to battle with questions concerning the Dark/Light binary, his role as a Night Watch agent, and his romantic feelings for Svetlana. He tells Svetlana that she should refrain from permanently joining the Night Watch, explaining that their relationship would never survive the imbalance of power between them. Subsequently, another member of the Night Watch – the handsome Ignat – seduces her. Svetlana expresses regret to Anton, confessing that she only spent time with Ignat in order to make him jealous. However, when Anton offers his forgiveness to Svetlana for her infidelity, she becomes furious. Svetlana's momentary intimacy with Ignat was a test: if Anton truly loved her, she would suffer consequences for her betrayal.

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<sup>72</sup> Note that this approach is similar to those found in Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* and Ivan Efremov's *Tumannost' andromedy*.

In another episode, Zavulon visits Anton in secret and reveals that the Watch organizations are vying for a magical piece of chalk capable of rewriting the “*Book of Destiny*.” He claims that Svetlana must play a central role in a dangerous ceremony, and that the ritual’s completion will forever cement her association with the Night Watch. Anton is entirely mistrustful of his enemy’s words, believing him to be playing a calculated trick. However, when Geser later confirms that Zavulon was speaking the truth concerning the book, the hero begins to worry about his future with Svetlana. His anxiety is compounded when Geser declares that the mission to rewrite the *Book of Destiny* is to begin that very night.

As Anton walks the streets of Moscow in a dejected mood, he witnesses Alisa using a powerful illegal spell. In a reversal of events in Book One, Alisa is forced to grant Anton the right to use a spell of equal force. Empowered with this special pardon, Anton proceeds to collect Light energy by draining all of the happiness from nearby humans.<sup>73</sup> He arrives at the location designated for the ceremony of the *Book of Destiny* overflowing with power. Members of both the Day Watch and Night Watch are present, with the recently initiated Inquisitor, Maksim, serving as overseer of the proceedings. A raging vortex appears as Egor and Svetlana, the two principal actors in the magical ritual, begin to perform their parts: Svetlana, wielding the magical chalk, is to rewrite destiny using Egor as a conduit. Before she is able to make any changes, however, Anton uses all of his power to place himself at Svetlana’s side inside the vortex.

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<sup>73</sup> It is interesting to note that, in Lukianenko’s world, Light Others must cause humans suffering and pain in order to increase their powers; whereas Dark Others bring joy and pleasure into people’s lives when building their own.

Svetlana declares her love for Anton and begs him to help her decide whether or not to rewrite destiny (and thereby officially join the Night Watch). Anton's response, which further illustrates Lukianenko's message of personal responsibility, is as follows:

"Listen to me," I said, not sure how much conviction there was in my voice. Even now I wasn't entirely convinced myself. "Sometimes the most important thing isn't to do something. Sometimes it's more important not to do anything. Some things you have to decide for yourself, without any advice. From me, or Geser, or Zabulon, or the Light or the Darkness. All on your own. . . . we all create our own destinies" (Lukyanenko 2006, 453).

Anton refuses to help Svetlana choose between himself and the Night Watch, recognizing that people must decide for themselves the paths they will take in life. He makes a personal sacrifice, allowing his lover to choose her own destiny without interference. Nevertheless, Svetlana drops the chalk, exits the magical ceremony, and informs Geser that she will be leaving the Night Watch.

Geser acts dismayed that Svetlana failed to use the *Book of Destiny* until Zavulon, cackling with joy at his enemies' failure, departs into the Twilight. Geser then describes the true purpose of the magical ceremony: rather than an initiation rite for Svetlana, this situation was arranged to allow Olga to regain her status as a high-ranking sorceress. Geser reveals that, while Anton and Svetlana distracted the other Others with conversation, Olga secretly used the chalk to rewrite destiny so that they could be together. Declaring his centuries-old love for Olga, he explains that Svetlana was never destined to join the Night Watch, and that the entire situation was a ruse designed to disguise the couple's true intentions. Geser, like most members of Lukianenko's fictional world, acts based on his own personal feelings and motivations.

The Dark/Light binary that pervades Lukianenko's narrative functions as a background against which to portray the moral and ethical struggles of psychologically complex individuals. While Light and Darkness (good and evil) are represented by official organizations, the system of justice in Lukianenko's world is based in something above them. Whether through agents of fate or some sort of cosmic justice, the characters are all punished or rewarded based on their personal choices and actions.

Against the backdrop of 1990s cultural history, Lukianenko's message of personal responsibility represents a crucial step forward in the attempt to redefine Russian identity. Unlike the cold-blooded protagonists typical of *chernukha*, Lukianenko's characters consider the decisions they make from sophisticated moral and ethical perspectives. Anton, Maksim, and Egor perform acts of self-sacrifice motivated exclusively by their consciences; Svetlana, Olga, and Alisa make consequential decisions based on their individual moral compasses; even Geser and Zavulon, the two individuals most dedicated to the goals of their respective organizations, at times put themselves and inferiors at risk for entirely personal reasons. Moreover, if we view the Watches as symbols for competing chauvinistic institutions (e.g. gangs, governments, religions, etc.), and consider the characters as typical examples of modern humanity, we can recognize a critical flaw in the foundations of collectivist ideology. That is, if a collective cannot rely on the loyalty of its individual members, it ceases to function effectively as a cohesive unit (both practically and ideologically). Thus, while Lukianenko's narrative features habitual violations of the boundaries between good and evil, it reinforces the importance of individual conscience and personal responsibility by underscoring the realized consequences of the characters' choices:

Anton's decision to alter a man's morality results in Egor's turn toward the Darkness, Kostia's decision to save the vampiress results in a deeper friendship with Anton, and Maksim's decision to proactively murder agents of evil earns him the title of Inquisitor.<sup>74</sup>

Another significant feature of Lukianenko's novel in the context of Russian sociocultural history is its inclusion of dynamic female characters. Alisa, Svetlana, and Olga play critical roles in the narrative, and they are portrayed with notable psychological complexity. Unlike any other work of *fantastika* discussed so far in this dissertation, *Nochnoi dozor* features women in both protagonist and antagonist roles. Women are not completely excluded or relegated to minor positions (as they are in Beliaev's *Chelovek-amfibiia*, Adamov's *Taina dvukh okeanov*, and the Strugatskiis' *Piknik na obochine* and *Trudno byt' bogom*), nor are they portrayed exclusively as model heroes (as they are in Efremov's *Tumannost' andromedy* and Pipinashvili's *Taina dvukh okeanov*), nor are they consigned exclusively to antagonistic roles (as in Protazanov's *Aelita* and Nikolai Rozhkov's *Taina dvukh okeanov*). Instead, they are granted complexity on par with their male counterparts: they are neither completely good, nor completely evil – they are simply fallible (human) beings.

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<sup>74</sup> For Maksim, being granted the position of Inquisitor is both a punishment and a reward. This is because the vigilante murders he commits, which are crimes in the eyes of the Watch organizations, actually represent a harmony of good and evil in the greater balance of power. As such, the repercussions are also balanced: he is elevated to a position above both Darkness and Light, but also sentenced to a lifetime of "hard labor" (Lukyanenko 2006, 326).



The fact that women are thus portrayed in *Nochnoi dozor* indicates a critical departure from historical tendencies in Russian *fantastika*.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, it is illustrative of a notable reconsideration of the role of women in post-Soviet Russian culture. According to historian Barbara Clements:

As so often during periods of rapid change in Russian history, there was a widespread perception in the post-Soviet years that gender required discussion. When that discussion began in the early 1990s, it centered on the perception that women's burdens, considerable in Soviet times, had increased. . . . Because so many people believed that survival of the family depended primarily on women, the question of how they were to live in the new societies took on critical importance. The result was a broadening and deepening of the discussion begun under Gorbachev into the liveliest public consideration of gender matters since NEP (Clements 2012, 290).

A reevaluation of gender and female agency became a central feature of the search for Russian identity in the aftermath of Soviet collapse. The consequences of this reconsideration are evident in *Nochnoi dozor* and, as I will show in my analysis of its film adaptations, continued to play an important role in the sociocultural production of the Putin era. Thus, although it would be difficult to identify a specifically pro-feminist message in Lukianenko's novel, the equal agency granted to male and female characters may be considered a noteworthy sign of a struggle to redefine perceptions of gender in the post-Soviet space.

The final point that I would like to address concerns *Nochnoi dozor* and its place in the Russian *fantastika* tradition. Unlike every other work analyzed so far in this dissertation, Lukianenko's novel is not science fiction (*nauchnaia fantastika*), but rather fantasy (*fentezi*). In

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<sup>75</sup> Aside from author Kir Bulychev, whose *Alisa Selezneva* series is centered on a dynamic female protagonist, it is difficult to name a single Soviet *fantastika* writer who portrayed women with a level of complexity comparable to that found in Lukianenko's *Nochnoi dozor*.

*Khudozhestvennyi vymysel v literature 20 veka* Russian literary critic Elena Kovtun describes

this subgenre in the following way:

The most foundational premise of literary *fantastika* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the distinction between rational *fantastika* (science fiction) and fantasy. These two kinds of *fantastika* are, according to our concept, two independent types of fiction and differ in their *means of recreation of reality*, which is reflected in the particularities of their problematics and artistic structures, although both types of fiction also use similar techniques. . . . We adopted the (English) term "fantasy" . . . due to the lack of adequate domestic definitions. It refers to "literature in the realm of which there is a miraculous effect; in it there is the foundational and unavoidable element of supernatural or impossible worlds, characters, and objects, with which the heroes and readers are in a more or less close relationship." As can be seen, the wording is quite broad, but a more accurate definition, apparently, does not exist.

The undeveloped theory of fantasy in domestic literary criticism is connected with the fact that, in reality, for many years in our country we recognized only one kind of *fantastika* – science fiction, or "fantasy of the rational premise," which was considered the highest stage in the development of fantastic prose, and left supernatural *fantastika* far behind. . . . Fantasy was practically not published and not studied. . . . Interest in the miraculous in all its manifestations, from the mystical-philosophical to horror, was considered a banal means of increasing the entertainment of the plot, which had no artistic value (Kovtun 2008, 78-9).

Representing the "unscientific" side of *fantastika*, fantasy allows for the creation of parallel worlds without the burden of justifying (or even addressing) their plausibility. Nikolai Gogol's

*Vii* (1835) and Fedor Dostoevskii's *Son smeshnogo cheloveka* (1877) fall into this category, as do Aleksander Beliaev's *Ariel* (1941) and the Strugatskii brothers' *Skazka o troike* (1968).

Moreover, while the Soviet Union did not have a particularly vibrant tradition of literary fantasy, which was "anathema to the Soviet state that billed itself as the ultimate fantasy utopia" (Norris 2012, 235), the newly formed Russian Federation witnessed an explosion of domestically produced fantasy in the 1990s (Kovtun 2008, 386). Sergei Lukianenko, Mariia Semenova, Viktor

Pelevin, Boris Akunin, and Marina and Sergei Diachenko quickly established themselves as leaders within the (sub)genre, and proved that fantasy was not only capable of – but also effective at – addressing issues central to post-Soviet cultural dialogue. Tellingly, the three examples of post-Soviet literature discussed in this chapter (*Nochnoi dozor*, *Generation 'P,'* and *On drakon*), which are among the best-selling and most adapted works of 1990s Russian *fantastika*, are all fantasy. My analysis of these works, including the current study of Lukianenko's *Nochnoi dozor*, serve as evidence of this subgenre's integral role in the post-Soviet sociocultural environment.

*Nochnoi dozor* may be considered a breath of fresh air in the context of 1990s cultural history. Challenging the ideological bases of collectivism (e.g. Soviet socialism) and amorality (e.g. *chernukha*), Lukianenko presents a worldview founded in situational ethics and personal accountability. He outlines a rational standard for individual conduct, and underscores advantages and disadvantages of philosophical approaches popular in modern society. Employing a fantastic parallel universe to illustrate a universally-applicable approach to understanding the world, *Nochnoi dozor* represents a significant contribution to the effort to redefine Russian cultural identity in the post-Soviet period.

### Timur Bekmambetov's *Nochnoi dozor* and *Dnevnoi dozor*

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian cinema underwent a turbulent period as the state-run film industry had to be transformed into a commercial industry. It was not until the late 1990s that the first signs of a new industry emerged. In the new millennium, the industry recovered once the social and economic stability of the Putin era had facilitated the growth of a solid infrastructure. Russian filmmakers could at last connect with their audiences and create a balanced diet of commercially successful films and art-house films. The landmark for this resurgence of new Russian cinema was the first Russian blockbuster, *Night Watch (Nochnoi dozor)*, which was followed by a host of commercially successful films from 2005 onwards (Beumers 2009, 3).

Premiering in 2004 and 2006 respectively, Timur Bekmambetov's *Nochnoi dozor* and *Dnevnoi dozor* were released to wide acclaim – shattering domestic box office records and helping to reestablish the reputation of Russian cinema both at home and abroad.<sup>76</sup> More importantly, they inspired a broad and multifaceted dialogue on the defining features of Russian identity in the twenty-first century. Illustrating the domestic impact of the first film, historian Stephen Norris writes,

A combination of slick special effects and a sophisticated marketing campaign made sure that *Night Watch* became a sensation. It shattered box-office records and, more importantly, bested the receipts from Western blockbusters such as *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* and *Spider-Man 2*. Its success generated a host of debates just as its clever use of stars and cultural icons made it both a cult film and a commercial one (Norris 2012, 277).

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<sup>76</sup> Benefiting from economic stabilization under Putin, *Nochnoi dozor* and *Dnevnoi dozor* were the first domestically produced films to exceed ten million dollars at the Russian box-office (Beumers 2009, 242). According to Kinopoisk.ru, one of the best sources for statistics on post-Soviet Russian cinema, *Nochnoi dozor* made over \$16 million and *Dnevnoi dozor* over \$31 million on the domestic market. They matched or exceeded these figures (respectively) on the international market (Kinopoisk 2019a and Kinopoisk 2019b).

Mixing Hollywood cinematic methods with ideas, themes, and philosophies from Russian culture, *Nochnoi dozor* and *Dnevnoi dozor* became the first commercially-successful *fantastika* blockbusters of the post-Soviet era. They effectively bridge the divide between aesthetic and commercialist demands for Russian cinema – featuring attractive, fast-paced storylines (accompanied by contemporary pop/rock hits and impressive special effects) that also succeed in expressing a meaningful ethical message. Thus, while it is fair to say that Bekmambetov's adaptations suffer from the over-stylization characteristic of contemporary Hollywood action films, it would be a critical mistake to label them ideologically vapid.

*Nochnoi dozor* and *Dnevnoi dozor* collectively portray or address virtually every major event and theme found in Lukianenko's novel. Although split into two feature-length films, they follow a single cohesive narrative. Together, they express a perspective on freedom and personal responsibility directly in line with that developed in their literary source. Thus, although superficially defined by flashy special effects, fast-paced action, shameless product placement, and overwhelming integration of contemporary pop culture, these films illustrate a positive and widely-applicable ideological message. Bekmambetov's highly-stylized fictional world, like the dualistic world of Lukianenko's novel, is a backdrop against which to portray the moral and ethical struggles of psychologically complex individuals.

The first scenes of *Nochnoi dozor* depict an ancient bridge-top battle between forces of good and evil. Dressed in medieval armor and fighting for the side of Light, Geser and his army wage war against Zavulon and the forces of Darkness. An unseen narrator explains the origins of the Watch organizations, also introducing the film's primary conflict and central theme.

As long as humanity has existed, there have been Others among us. They are human, yet they have abilities far beyond those of ordinary men. Witches, sorcerers, shapeshifters – the Others are as varied as stars in the sky. The Others are soldiers in the eternal war, the struggle between Darkness and Light. Light Others protected mankind from the Dark Others, who plagued and tortured humans. Legend tells of a day when the two armies met on a bridge. Geser, Lord of the Light, and Zavulon, general of the Darkness, faced each other: and neither one would give way. And so began a great battle, bloody and merciless. Zavulon gloried in the slaughter, but Lord Geser wept. As the screams of the dying reached heaven, Geser realized the armies were equally matched. And he knew that unless the fighting stopped, every last soul would perish. So, he stopped the battle. Thus, the forces of Light and Darkness forged a truce. Geser spoke for the Light and Zavulon spoke for the Darkness. And these things were agreed: No one could be forced to good or evil without choosing freely. The soldiers of Light would be called Night Watch, making sure Dark Others obeyed the truce. And the soldiers of Darkness would be called Day Watch, to do the same. And so, the balance would be kept for centuries to come. But one day, an Other would come, more powerful than any before him. Like all Others, he would have to choose between Light and Dark. And his choice would change the balance forever (Bekmambetov 2004).

Following this exposition, the action moves to a Moscow apartment complex in 1992. Anton Gorodetskii, an unaware Light Other, consults with a Dark Witch concerning his pregnant girlfriend. The witch informs Anton that the child is not his own, predicting that his lover will run away to be with the real father. She offers to perform an act of magic that will kill the child in the womb, but insists that Anton agree to take personal responsibility for the consequences. Anton, faced with the choice of aborting the child or losing his partner, decides on the former. Just before the witch is able to complete her spell, however, members of the Night Watch violently interrupt the ceremony.<sup>77</sup> Ignoring Anton completely, they arrest the witch and charge her with illegal use act of Dark magic. They notice that Anton is also an Other when he proves himself capable of hearing their conversations in the Twilight.

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<sup>77</sup> This action sequences features CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) of unprecedented quality in Russian cinema.

The narrative moves to present day Moscow. Anton, now a junior agent in the Night Watch, is assigned a mission to track two vampires suspected of hunting humans without a license. To prepare for the operation, Anton drinks a shot of warm blood obtained from his neighbors: two unassuming vampires by the names of Kostia and Gennady. Egor, a young unaware Other, is lured across the city by an ominous call. Anton tracks the boy onto a metro car, but is confronted by the sight of a powerful presence. A young woman, Svetlana, appears to be surrounded by a powerful cloud of energy. Anton uses a flashlight with a magical bulb to illuminate her aura, revealing that she is a powerful Light Other. Sensing a connection to this mysterious woman, Anton purposefully bumps into her on the platform to get her attention, but pretends that his actions were unintentional when confronted.

In a trance, Egor travels to an abandoned building, where a recently-initiated female vampire and her partner entrap him. With technical support from the Night Watch, Anton discovers the abandoned building and bursts in just in time to stop them from biting Egor. The hero is badly injured in a fight with the suspects, but ultimately kills the male vampire with the help of his colleagues. At Night Watch headquarters, Geser uses magic to scan Anton's memories for images of Svetlana. He tells Anton a legend about a woman afflicted with a "curse of damnation," and explains that Svetlana is destined to cause catastrophe wherever she goes. Meanwhile, Zavulon plays a video game<sup>78</sup> pitting himself against Anton in a rooftop battle. He

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<sup>78</sup> To illustrate the ubiquity of product placement and references to pop culture in *Nochnoi dozor*, allow me to briefly describe this scene: Alisa performs in a contemporary all-woman pop group to a concert hall packed with thousands of adoring fans. Her bodyguard, dressed in a full Adidas track suit, uses a mobile phone to pass on orders from the Day Watch leadership. Zavulon watches Alisa's concert on several televisions while simultaneously playing a video

orders his girlfriend, Alisa, to track down the missing vampiress and use her to lure Anton into a trap. In a flashy sports car and matching outfit, Alisa drives around Moscow until she locates the target. She then convinces the starving vampiress to use Egor as a means to trap Anton, offering both revenge for her murdered partner and blood as a reward.

Geser assigns Olga, a shapeshifting sorceress, to watch over Anton and guard him from Dark assassins. At Anton's apartment, Kostia confronts him over the killing of a fellow vampire, aggressively pushing Anton to justify his actions. Meanwhile, a Dark vortex emerges near the Domodedovo Airport (conspicuously near to the home of the cursed Svetlana), and Egor is left alone without supervision in his apartment.

Anton and Olga enter Egor's apartment through the Twilight and see him present in the magical dimension. Egor and Olga are nearly killed by the Twilight's destructive powers, but Anton saves them by cutting himself – allowing the Twilight to feed on his blood. When Egor emerges from the Twilight, Anton and Olga explain the conflict between Darkness and Light, stating that he will eventually have to choose a side for himself. Noticing a picture sitting on a desk, Anton recognizes his former lover and realizes that he is the boy's father: Egor was the child he sought to have aborted in 1992. Meanwhile, the vortex around Svetlana grows more chaotic, causing an airplane crash and a power plant explosion. Anton and Olga are called to deal with the situation, and two other Night Watch members (shapeshifters named Tiger Cub and Bear) arrive to guard Egor.

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game of his own design. The game is an obvious analogue to the popular Mortal Kombat series, and Zavulon uses a modified PlayStation controller that features an image of Che Guevara on the inlay.



Anton gains entry to Svetlana's apartment by pretending to be one of her business clients. Svetlana is terrified when she realizes that Anton is an imposter, but emotionally reveals that she is overwhelmed with guilt because she allowed her mother to refuse her kidney for a life-saving transplant. As Svetlana confesses her feelings, the vortex rapidly dissipates. Anton recognizes that Svetlana has cured herself, and that he has saved her (and countless innocents) simply by lending a sympathetic ear.

At Egor's apartment complex, the vampiress lures Egor to the roof and kidnaps him. When Tiger Cub and Bear corner her, she demands to see her boyfriend's killer. Anton arrives and attempts to convince her to "act like a human" and let the boy go. When she refuses, Anton fights to free Egor from her grip, but is knocked unconscious as Zavulon crashes an elevator through the complex roof. Anton awakens to find Zavulon waiting for him, and an armor-clad battle begins between armies of Darkness and Light reminiscent of the opening scene.

Anton and Zavulon fight over Egor, each claiming that the other is illegally interfering in the boy's life. When the head of the Day Watch gains the upper hand, Egor runs to rescue Anton. Zavulon, who has played this scenario out in his self-styled video game, uses a spell to force Anton to attack Egor. When Egor asks if Anton wanted to kill him, Alisa reads a Night Watch report detailing his attempted abortion. Infuriated by this betrayal, Egor rejects the Night Watch and chooses the side of Darkness. Zavulon explains that Anton is responsible for Egor's turn, and that there is nothing anyone can do to change his fate. The film ends with Anton repeatedly punching the unflinching Zavulon, taking out his frustrations on the man who tricked him. A voice-over narrator states: "And so it came to pass that a Great Other came into the world and

chose the side of evil. Legend says he will plunge the world into Darkness. But so long as there are those among us who believe in the Light, there will be hope” (Bekmambetov 2004).

The message of *Nochnoi dozor* is one of individual freedom and personal responsibility. Anton pays for his choice to authorize Egor’s abortion by losing his son to the Darkness. Svetlana curses herself with a destructive vortex out of personal guilt for her mother’s death – and is redeemed when she decides to forgive herself. Even Zavulon, a clear analogue for the biblical Satan, remains faithful to his promise not to kill Anton out of fear of personal consequences. The characters of Bekmambetov’s film make choices based on motivations that are often at odds with their “Dark” or “Light” moral proclivities and associations: they are part of collective structures, but they are also psychologically complex individuals. Thus, while Bekmambetov’s first blockbuster film employs a style similar to that of its more ideologically vapid Hollywood counterparts (especially those from the superhero genre), it also exhibits a clear moral message: in a free society, individuals must take responsibility for their personal choices and actions. This message is strengthened and further developed in the director’s second film.

*Dnevnoi dozor* begins with a legend about the historical figure Timur (Tamerlane) and a magical object referred to as the “chalk of fate” (*mel’ sud’by*). Timur, a powerful Other, attacks a supposedly impenetrable fortress (Samarkand). His army crashes through the walls of the compound on horseback, and Timur defeats a number of Others to reach a hidden temple. He obtains the chalk of fate, but is assassinated by a treacherous guard. As he lays dying, a monk named Zoar teaches Timur how to alter his fate, saving Timur’s life.

While patrolling the streets of contemporary Moscow, Anton and Svetlana are notified of a possible crime in progress. Svetlana, a new Night Watch initiate, convinces Anton to take her to the scene. They discover that a Dark Other is using magic needles to drain the life from innocent humans. Svetlana catches sight of a possible culprit and chases him into the Twilight. Anton follows into the supernatural dimension, but is left behind when both Svetlana and the suspect enter the second level of the Twilight – something only possible for the most powerful Others. Svetlana manages to remove the suspect's mask, revealing Egor, but becomes overwhelmed by the Twilight's energy. Anton stops Svetlana from shooting Egor with a magic flashlight, then barely manages to save her from the Twilight's destructive force.

At the fancy high-rise hotel that serves as the Day Watch headquarters, Zavulon makes a secret agreement with Anton's neighbor (the vampire Gennadii) and offers Egor another magical item with which to victimize humans. Meanwhile, Geser warns Anton that Egor and Svetlana are a threat to one another and must be kept apart. After meeting a Dark Other named Galina, Anton breaks into the Night Watch evidence locker to retrieve Egor's mask. There, he finds information about the legendary chalk of fate and decides that he will use it to change Egor's destiny. While Galina is walking home, she is murdered by an unknown assailant. The Day Watch is quick to lay the blame on Anton. Emotionally overwrought, Alisa (Zavulon's fiancé from *Nochnoi dozor*) recklessly drives her sports car through Moscow and then across the face of the hotel that serves as Day Watch headquarters.

At Night Watch headquarters, Geser instructs his colleagues to confirm their alibis for Galina's murder and uses a spell to switch the bodies of Olga and Anton for the latter's

protection. On patrol, Svetlana declares her love for Anton, unaware that she is speaking to him directly. Later, Anton reveals himself while she is in the shower, causing her to react emotionally. The two begin to kiss, and the setting suddenly changes to a pristine waterfall – a common Hollywood trope symbolizing passion and love. Meanwhile, Alisa approaches Kostia and declares her interest in him as a sexual partner. They take a passionate drive through the city, recklessly speeding and spinning the car in the center of busy intersections while making out.

Anton and Olga go out to eat together at a local restaurant and find a Dark Other murdered in the bathroom. Zavulon and the Day Watch appear and attempt to capture Anton, but are thwarted by Svetlana. At Night Watch headquarters, Inquisitors tell Geser that a warrant for Anton's elimination will be granted if his innocence is not proven by the following day. Anton, on the run from Dark Others, calls a member of the Night Watch in Samarkand to arrange access to Timur's tomb. Geser, warning Svetlana not to get too close to Anton, tells her about his history with Olga. He claims that he made a mistake and that Olga attempted to help him by breaking the truce. Ultimately, Geser was acquitted for his error, but Olga was sentenced to incarceration in the body of an owl. Although acting out of love, Olga was held accountable for her choice to commit the crime.

Anton and Olga realize that Zoar, a local restaurateur, is the monk from Timur's legend. Anton goes to Zoar, who offers him the chalk and instructs him to write down that which he most desires. Anton writes Egor's name and, to his elation, the boy instantly enters the restaurant and embraces him. However, as the two are having a friendly conversation, Egor demands that Anton leave Svetlana and join him at the Day Watch. When Anton refuses, Egor runs away. Zoar

tells Anton that the chalk did not work because he used it incorrectly. His explanation, which reiterates the central message of *Nochnoi dozor*, is as follows:

This is the place where my fate happens. . . . Your fate is somewhere else. You can't change the fate of another. Every living person must answer for his own. Do you remember where it was you violated your destiny? (Bekmambetov 2006)

On the street, Anton is cornered by members of the Day Watch and forced to run for his life.

Egor, who has secretly stolen the chalk of fate from Anton, offers it to Zavulon. Refusing the gift, he tells Egor to give it to Alisa instead.

Anton attacks and overpowers a Dark Other, stealing his identity to infiltrate Day Watch headquarters. He breaks into a room and finds himself in the middle of Egor's birthday celebration. Zavulon poisons Anton with a hallucinogen, sending him into a drunken stupor, then declares that it is time for a new war between Darkness and Light. Acting out emotionally, Anton grabs a microphone and begins a slurred speech declaring his innocence in the murder of Galina and the other Dark Others. When Gennadii unexpectedly enters the room looking for his son Kostia, Anton declares that he is the guilty party. Two Inquisitors suddenly appear and take Gennadii away as he loudly confesses that he committed the crime in a deal with Zavulon to make Kostia human again.

Kostia blames Zavulon for his father's arrest and attacks him, but is quickly overpowered. Zavulon drops Kostia to his death, causing Alisa to run away in tears. Meanwhile, Svetlana arrives at the hotel and encounters Egor in the hall. Egor attacks and overpowers her, then uses a powerful magical amulet to create massive destruction. Thousands of metal pellets pierce through Dark Others and innocent humans before causing power outages and major

damage in central Moscow. Anton chases down Alisa, who uses the chalk of fate to write Kostia's name. Anton tells her that she cannot bring Kostia back because she was not responsible for the decision that caused his death. He takes the chalk and enters the hall, running into the wounded Svetlana. Egor appears, and the two begin to pull Anton apart. Just in time, Geser intervenes, stopping time so that Anton can use the chalk of fate to rewrite his own destiny. Anton returns to the apartment where he sought Egor's abortion and writes on the wall "No" (*Net*).

Now back in 1992, Anton sees the word on the wall of the witch's apartment and decides not to go through with the abortion. His fate now changed, he remains an unaware Other and has no memories of his time with the Night Watch. Later, as Geser and Zavulon watch Anton walking in the park, they bet on whether or not he will be naturally inclined to speak to Svetlana. After passing by her in the rain, Anton turns and introduces himself. The film ends on a high note: Anton may have changed his fate, but he is still destined to be with his beloved.

Bekmambetov's *Dnevnoi dozor* further illustrates the message of personal freedom and responsibility developed in Lukianenko's *Nochnoi dozor*. Gennady's choice to assassinate Galina and other Dark Others, although motivated by love for his son, results in his imprisonment by the Inquisition. Olga's attempt to save Geser from punishment leads to her incarceration in the body of an owl. Alisa's affair with Kostia results in the latter's death, whereas Anton's honesty with Svetlana leads to a binding (and seemingly eternal) connection. Moreover, while Anton is forced to come to terms with the fact that he cannot change Egor, he is able to alter the boy's destiny by changing himself. The fact that this choice fundamentally

affected the morality of a being “more powerful than any before him” who was prophesied to “change the balance forever” between Darkness and Light underscores the importance of individual decisions in Bekmambetov’s world (Bekmambetov 2006).

One of the most notable differences between Lukianenko’s *Nochnoi dozor* and Bekmambetov’s films is an increased focus on issues of socioeconomic status in the latter. Anton’s decision to have Egor aborted is, in part, based on an anxiety that his lover might abandon him for a wealthier man. The hero regularly complains about his lot in life, and he and Svetlana are dispirited by (if not openly jealous of) the wealth flaunted by members of the Day Watch. Zavulon, for his part, is a stereotypical caricature of a Russian oligarch. He owns a hotel, drives flashy cars, wears fancy suits, and has a trophy wife (who, incidentally, he treats as property). He effectively rules over a personal economic empire, and constantly uses his wealth to emasculate Anton in the presence of his son. The anxiety that Anton feels over his inferior socioeconomic status is palpable, even if it is not expressed outright in the dialogue. Thus, if the conflict between Zavulon and Anton in Lukianenko’s *Nochnoi dozor* is predominantly centered around their Dark/Light group affiliations, in Bekmambetov’s film significantly more emphasis is put on their class identities. As a reflection of Russian cultural dialogue in the first half-decade of the twentieth century, this may be considered an indication of a reconsideration of socioeconomic issues in the aftermath of the economically unstable 1990s. As I will show in my analysis of Viktor Ginzburg’s *Generation P*, preoccupations with wealth, class, and social status became a defining feature of the Russian cultural mentality in the post-Soviet space. Understood from this perspective, Bekmambetov’s *Nochnoi dozor* and *Dnevnoi dozor* represent a notable

contribution to the dialogue on capitalism and Russia's oligarchical system in the twenty-first century.

Another significant innovation in Bekmambetov's films is an increased focus on domestic issues and the family dynamic. Unlike Lukianenko's novel, which is split into three books and follows three tangentially connected storylines, the entirety of Bekmambetov's narrative revolves around Egor's relationship to Anton and Zavulon – his two father figures. Anton's defining struggle is for redemption for what he did to his son, and Zavulon's central goal is keeping Egor on the side of Darkness. Alisa, Svetlana, and Egor's real mother approach the child from disparate perspectives, and their treatment of him illustrates different approaches to raising a child (Alisa spoils Egor and grants him maximum freedom, his real mother is loving but leaves him home alone to go to work, Svetlana attempts to discipline Egor but finds him uncontrollable). Moreover, while the relationship between Egor and his many role models is complicated, there is an extremely simple pathos at work in the relationship between Gennadii and his son Kostia. Like the self-sacrificing father in Gennadii Kazanskii and Vladimir Chebotarev's *Chelovek-amfibiia*, Gennadii chooses to put himself in mortal danger for the sake of his child – paying the ultimate price out of loyalty and love. Furthermore, while Anton's decision to rewrite destiny in a sense “uncreates” a family (by making Egor disappear), the final scenes depicting a budding relationship between Svetlana and Anton point to the creation of a new one. The combined portrayal of these interpersonal dynamics creates an image of domestic existence with which it is easy for viewers to identify. Thus, in the same way that domestic scenes in *Chelovek-amfibiia*, *Solaris*, and *Stalker* served to elicit empathy in a broad audience,



Bekmambetov's films capitalize on viewers' feelings of familial connection in order to lend greater weight to their underlying message.

*Nochnoi dozor* and *Dnevnoi dozor* helped to reestablish the reputation of Russian cinema both at home and abroad. They brought in a significant amount of money for the Russian government, prompting an increase in state funding and the proposal of blockbuster projects (including Bondarchuk's *Obitaemyi ostrov* films) previously considered too expensive to make. They succeeded on foreign markets, making an impression abroad that has had a lasting influence.<sup>79</sup> More importantly, however, these big budget blockbusters also succeeded in expressing a simple and relatable ideological approach to understanding the modern world. Against the background of amoralistic *chernukha* and the gangster cinema of the 1990s, they illustrate a new and more positive approach to conceptualizing Russian identity in the twenty-first century. Considering their immense success, it is safe to say that these films represent a critical turning point in Russian *fantastika* cinema away from the pessimistic and chaotic narratives characteristic of the 1990s toward a more optimistic and programmatic approach.

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<sup>79</sup> DVD sales for *Nochnoi dozor* and *Dnevnoi dozor* have collectively exceeded \$3.5 million in the United States alone. As of March 2019, these films are still making the rounds through the digital media markets Amazon, Hulu, and Netflix.

### Boris and Arkadii Strugatskii's *Gadkie lebedi*

Written in 1967, *Gadkie lebedi* is one of the Strugatskii brothers' most controversial works. In 1968, its planned publication in *Molodaia gvardiia* was abruptly cancelled by the Soviet censors on ideological grounds (Potts 1991, 14). In 1972, an unlicensed edition was published in Germany and smuggled into the USSR, causing an uproar against the authors in the ranks of the party (Howell 1994, 10 and Potts 1991, 71). The novella was not legally published until 1990, appearing in English translation nearly a decade before the average Russian had access to it.<sup>80</sup> However, while (and, mostly likely, because) the government considered the ideas expressed in *Gadkie lebedi* to be ideologically unacceptable, the intellectual elite and, in particular, the dissident intelligentsia, adopted it as a symbol of their collective identity. Through *samizdat* circulation, *Gadkie lebedi* came to hold a central position in the Soviet Union's unofficial, underground counterculture.

*Gadkie lebedi* follows the misadventures of Viktor Banev, a womanizing, alcoholic, misanthropic writer who lives in an unnamed semi-totalitarian European country.<sup>81</sup> Returning to his hometown to take care of his estranged daughter, Banev finds himself surrounded by ghoulish semi-human creatures in a place where the rain never stops. These beings, referred to as *mokretsy* (commonly translated as "slimies" or "midges"), live in a former leper colony on the

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<sup>80</sup> The first English translation was published in 1979 under the title *The Ugly Swans* (Strugatskii 1979). The first Russian publication of the entire book appeared only in 1993 (Strugatskii 1993), but a shortened version also appeared in a Russian science fiction collection in 1990 (*Sbornik nauchnoi fantastiki* 1990).

<sup>81</sup> Banev is a member of the intelligentsia and a dissident. He writes literature that is highly critical of the military, the government, and humankind itself. Banev's return to his hometown is partially predicated upon the fallout of his personal vendetta against the president of the country.

outskirts of the town and appear to be an advanced evolution of humankind. Rational, calculating, and highly intelligent, they behave in stark contrast to Banev's friends and associates – drunkards, stoolies, deviants, and the lowest of scoundrels.

The contrast between the *mokretsy* and the town's older generation is reinforced regularly throughout the narrative. Banev considers them arrogant and cold – perhaps a reflection of his own most distinguishing traits – but is curious about their rumored intellectual prowess. Unlike other adults in the town, who blame the *mokretsy* for the incessant rain and other mysterious occurrences, Banev tends to treat them merely as a nuisance. However, when he discovers that the local children have been flocking to these mysterious beings for special lessons, Banev becomes suspicious of their colony and its purpose. Through changes reflected in the personalities of the hero's daughter (Irma) and her friend Bol-Kunats, it becomes clear to Banev that the *mokretsy* are teaching the children new ideas and a new ideology.

Conversations with Irma and Bol-Kunats lead Banev to believe that the *mokretsy* are having a positive, if strange, effect on the children. Bol-Kunats speaks in a manner completely inconsistent with his age, using precise pronunciation, formal diction, and complex sentence structure in casual conversation. Banev's daughter is especially polite and respectful, exhibiting an emotional maturity that other characters note is uncommon in adolescent teenage girls. Moreover, if the children conduct themselves in a manner that appears to be very mature and un-childlike, the behavior of the town's adults provides a stark contrast. "Dr." Quadriga<sup>82</sup> and Pavor,

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<sup>82</sup> Ram Quadriga has an honorary degree, but is neither an academic nor an intellectual. Like Banev, his primary occupation appears to be drinking alcohol and philandering.

the hero's drinking buddies, harbor extremely cynical worldviews and spend virtually all of their time drinking, fighting, and complaining about their lives. Diana, the single (adult) female character, is somewhere between a socialite and a prostitute – flirting with the men that enter the local hotel and offering her company in exchange for personal favors. Even Golem, the resident doctor of the *mokretsy* compound and their most ardent defender, tends to act more like an immature adolescent than an adult. The children's behavior, although peculiar and seemingly unnatural, is decidedly superior to that of their parents.

The ideological message of *Gadkie lebedi* can best be understood through an analysis of two central episodes. The first, a conversation between Banev and a classroom full of students, illustrates the worldview of the younger generation. After accepting an invitation to speak at the local school from Irma and Bol-Kunats, Banev develops a lecture with which to educate the children. When he arrives at the school and begins to deliver the lecture, however, the students ambush him with questions he finds extremely agitating. When asked what type of future he would wish for the children, Banev coyly replies that he hopes most of all that they will be intelligent, kind, and work for the good of humankind. The children's response, key portions of which are cited below, illustrates their perspective on the older generation and introduces an enigmatic plan for the future.

"I don't understand completely," said the pretty little girl. "You would like us to be intelligent, that is, to put it in terms of your aphorism, to think and feel the same way as you do. But I've gone through all your books and find only negativism in them. There is no affirmative program. On the other hand, you would like us to work for the good of mankind. That is, literally, for the good of those dirty, unpleasant types who fill up your books. After all, your books are realistic, aren't they? . . ."

“Look,” said Victor. “You young people probably haven’t noticed it, but you’re cruel. You’re cruel out of the best possible motives, but it’s cruelty just the same. And it can’t bring anything except fresh grief, fresh tears, and fresh baseness. That’s what you have in mind. And don’t think that you’re saying something very new. To destroy the old world and build up a new one on its bones is a very old idea. And never once has it brought the desired results. The same thing that calls forth the desire for merciless destruction in the old world quickly adapts itself to the process of destruction, to cruelty and mercilessness. It becomes essential to this process and always gets retained. It becomes the master of the new world and, in the final analysis, kills the bold destroyers themselves. A crow won’t peck out the eye of its brother; you can’t fight cruelty with cruelty. Irony and pity, my young friends. Irony and pity! . . .”

“I’m afraid you’ve misunderstood us, Mr. Banev,” he said. “We’re not cruel at all, and if we are cruel from your point of view, then it’s only theoretical. After all, we’re not intending to destroy your old world. We intend to build a new one. It’s you that are cruel: you can’t imagine building the new without destroying the old. And we can imagine this very well. We’ll even help your generation build its heaven, and you can drink liquor to your heart’s content. We’re building, Mr. Banev, only building. We’re not destroying anything, only building” (Strugatskii 1979, 68-76).

The children criticize Banev and his generation for their cynicism and lack of a constructive ideology. They declare that they are not interested in destroying or dismantling society, but rather in building something new for themselves. Their worldview is both inclusive and progressive, based on theories from the “old world” but wholly new in its approach to the future. Unfortunately for the reader – and for the town’s adults – this approach is never fleshed out or explained in any rational way.

A second episode illustrates the perspective of the older generation in *Gadkie lebedi*. While sitting at the local bar with Banev, Pavor drunkenly demands to have a conversation on a serious topic. He then delivers a rambling and passionate monologue elucidating his perspective on contemporary circumstances. He says,

Humanity is bankrupt in the biological sense. The birthrate is falling, cancer is spreading along with feeble-mindedness and neuroses of all sorts, people are turning into drug addicts. Every day they consume hundreds of tons of alcohol, nicotine, or simply narcotics, they started with hashish and cocaine and ended with LSD. We're degenerating. We've ruined the natural world and the man-made one is ruining us. And we've bankrupted ourselves ideologically. We've gone through all philosophical systems and discredited every one, we've tried all possible ethical systems and we've stayed the same amoral louts we always were, no better than troglodytes. And that's the worst of it, that this whole ignorant human mass is not going to improve, it started out as trash and that's the way it's going to stay. It thirsts after gods and leaders, law and order, it demands them. And every time it gets its gods, its leaders, and its order it becomes dissatisfied because in fact it doesn't need any of it. It doesn't need gods and it doesn't need order, what it needs is chaos and anarchy, bread and circuses. Right now, the iron will of necessity has forced it into dependence on a weekly paycheck. But it's sick of this necessity, and it escapes from it every evening into alcohol and narcotics. But the hell with it, the hell with this rotting pile of shit, it's been stinking for ten thousand years and that's all it's good for. There's something more frightening – that this process of disintegration has seized us as well, the real people, the individuals. We see this disintegration and we imagine that it doesn't affect us. But it's mastering us through hopelessness, it's eating away at our will, swallowing us up. And then this damned democratic upbringing: *egalite*, *fraternite*, all men are brothers, we're all made the same. We're constantly identifying with the common herd and we blame ourselves if we happen to find that we're smarter, that we have different needs and different goals in life. It's time we understood this and drew some conclusions from it. It's time we save ourselves (Strugatskii 1979, 129-130).

Pavor's speech betrays a great deal about the adult generation's worldview. He sees humanity as a "rotting pile of shit" that has discredited all ideological approaches to improving itself, and declares that contemporary circumstances are turning people into drug addicts and degenerates. He discredits chauvinist and collectivist ideologies, while at the same time maintaining that the existing system is inimical to the individual. Most importantly, he expresses a perspective on the hopelessness of modern man's ideological predicament: there appears to be no way forward, and no known ideas capable of saving humanity from self-destruction and inevitable implosion.

The two episodes I have described create a clear contrast between the worldviews of the older and younger generations in the Strugatskiis' novella. The town's adults live in a state of perpetual inebriation and are seemingly incapable of viewing a path forward for civilization. The *mokretsy* and the town's children, on the other hand, are comparatively optimistic and motivated by the idea of developing a new society and new way of life. They have opposing approaches to the world, and are equally dismissive of one another. However, while told from Banev's cynical adult perspective, the narrative of *Gadkie lebedi* emphasizes the children's progressive approach as the only rational option.

The climax of the Strugatskiis' novella takes place at the barrier surrounding the *mokretsy* compound: a theoretical dividing line between the old and new worlds. Learning that the children have abandoned their parents to live with the *mokretsy*, the townspeople form a mob and gather at the compound to retrieve them. The military unit guarding the facility clash with local police, fascist gangsters, and regular townspeople, but are unable to subdue them. Just as the crowd begins to break through the gates, however, one of the *mokretsy* interrupts with a booming voice.

“Stop your shouting,” said the voice. “Stop waving your hands and making threats. Is it really so difficult for you to drop this nonsense and think calmly for a few minutes? You are perfectly well aware that your children left you of their own will, nobody forced them and nobody dragged them by the collar. They left you because you had become totally disagreeable to them. They no longer wish to live the way you live and the way your forebears lived. You love to imitate your forebears and consider this a human virtue, and they don't. They don't want to turn into drunkards and debauchers, into petty slaves and conformists. They don't want you to turn them into criminals; they don't want your families and they don't want your government” (Strugatskii 1979, 68-76).

Following this unpleasant but rational explanation, the townspeople become dejected and disperse. Recognizing that their children are lost to the influence of the *mokretsy*, many begin to evacuate their homes and leave the moldy and decrepit town.

Banev and Diana ultimately decide to remain. Consequently, they bear witness to a miraculous transformation: like a mirage, the buildings, streets, and *mokretsy* compound disappear bit by bit until they no longer exist. Bol-Kunats and Irma appear running through a distant field, but they now appear as well-developed and happy young adults. Diana's appearance also changes, transforming her in the hero's mind into "a sort of Diana that he had never previously thought possible, Diana the Joyful" (Strugatskii 1972, 267). After witnessing these inexplicable phenomena, Banev also experiences a transformation. He is absorbed into a different reality, crossing the borderline between the old and new worlds. However, forcing the reader to question his place in this world, he delivers a final enigmatic line: "All this is great, but I'd better not forget to go back" (ibid).

Viewed as an allegory for Soviet society in the 1970s, *Gadkie lebedi* illustrates a generational divide between those who grew up before and after the Thaw. Like the strange visitation in the Strugatskiis' *Piknik na obochine*, the enigmatic event at the center of *Gadkie lebedi*<sup>83</sup> may be viewed as a symbol for the sociocultural liberalization that took place in the late 1950s. The *mokretsy* – adults influenced by the event – spread new ideas and ideologies to the younger generation, making a profound impact on their worldview before suddenly vanishing.

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<sup>83</sup> Although it is described only retrospectively and in vague detail, the narrative makes clear that a mysterious event was the impetus for the incessant rain, mysterious events, and transformation of the *mokretsy* (who were originally simple townspeople) into hyperintelligent beings.



The older generation, either indifferent or hostile to the *mokretsy*, revel in drunkenness and cynicism. Mostly ignorant of the effect that the event has had on their children and society, they spend their time invalidating philosophical theories and complaining that there is no right way to live. Stuck in an ideological rut, the unenlightened adults look to historical models for guidance for the future; whereas the younger generation looks to the “other” for new approaches.

The juxtaposition of the older and younger generations illustrates a divide between those who were transformed by the progressive ideas of the Thaw and those who were not. Through predominantly negative depictions of the older generation, *Gadkie lebedi* provides criticism of those who were left behind by this powerful wave of liberalism in Soviet society. The adults are hypocritical and apathetic, unable to break from their antiquated approaches and lifestyles. The children, on the other hand, are intelligent, disciplined, and forward-thinking. Like the *mokretsy*, they are depicted as supernatural, almost godlike creatures. Focused on the goal of finding a more rational approach to understanding the universe, they represent a hope for a better future.

Banev may be viewed as a symbol for those who were able to overcome the generational divide: that is, those who were able to overcome their cynicism and embrace progressive ideas. As a writer and open-minded intellectual, Banev decides to join the children and *mokretsy* even though he doesn’t fully understand their goals or motivations. One might say that, like some members of the Stagnation-era dissident intelligentsia, Banev chose to embrace a new (albeit nebulous) future over a return to traditional ways of life. His transformation at the end of the novella indicates his adoption into the children’s world, but the final enigmatic line suggests that

he does not truly fit in. While Banev appears to appreciate the new world, it is alien to him: he is compelled to “go back” to his old world.

### Konstantin Lopushanskii's *Gadkie lebedi*

As is well attested in recent movie treatments of the Strugatskii's work such as *Gadkie lebedi* (*Ugly Swans*; Lopushanskii Russia 2006), *Obitaemyi ostrov* (*The Inhabited Island*; Bondarchuk Russia 2008–9) and *Trudno byt' bogom* (*Hard to Be a God*; German Russia 2013), the classics of Soviet sf continue to intrigue the popular imagination. They represent one branch of the *Kulturgut* that is being actively recycled and transformed in the post-Soviet context (Khagi 2015, 199).

First premiering in 2006, Konstantin Lopushanskii's *Gadkie lebedi* is an *auteur* film adaptation of the Strugatskii's eponymous novella. A co-production with state funding from both France and the Russian Federation, and support from the Gorbachev Foundation and the International Green Cross, it is a particularly interesting example of artistic cinema produced in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Featuring modern special effects and a complex ideological message, it bridges the gap between aesthetic and commercialist demands for cinema, but does so in a way that contrasts with its blockbuster contemporaries. As such, it may be viewed as both a continuation of the *auteur* tradition of film adaptation and a response from the aesthetic camp to the perceived Americanization and over-commercialization of Russian cinema in the Putin era.

The narrative of Lopushanskii's *Gadkie lebedi* features some crucial differences from that of its literary source. Like earlier *auteur* directors, including Andrei Tarkovskii and Evgenii Sherstobitov, Lopushanskii creates a unique voice and expresses an original message in his adaptation. In the process, he contributes to an ongoing dialogue that has its roots in the unofficial counterculture of the Stagnation period, while also promoting a worldview that is

applicable to the present day. Exhibiting a perspective that is at once critical of the government and apologetic for the intelligentsia, Lopushanskii's film offers a new approach to understanding Russian identity in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In order to illustrate my point, I will now turn to a summary of the film's principle events.

Set in the near future, *Gadkie lebedi* centers around Viktor Banev and a mysterious "zone" (*zona*) on the outskirts of the fictional Russian city Tashlinsk. In the film's opening scene, Banev rides a train through a burning forest as firefighters attempt to put out the flames. He arrives at the home of Dr. Pilman, the foremost authority on the zone and its history. Banev identifies himself as a Russian writer who lives in America and has recently become a member of the UN Commission on Tashlinsk. When Pilman asks why a writer would volunteer to join such a commission, Banev admits that his true motivation for the journey is a personal quest to save his daughter. Warning Banev of the dangers of the flooded city and its strange inhabitants, Pilman claims that the so-called "*mokretsy*" represent a major threat to humankind.

Banev meets his ex-wife Liudmila in an airport to talk about their daughter – Ira. Liudmila describes a sudden mysterious event that took place while she and her new husband were out of town. She explains that the city was quarantined by the military, and that no one is allowed to enter the zone or contact its residents. Ira, who was in a boarding school for gifted children at the time of the event, is rumored to be alive in the city.

Banev travels by helicopter and boat through the heavily-militarized zone and meets fellow UN commission members Dr. Isaac Golemba and Dr. Gennadii Komov. On the way, Golemba explains that the commission will soon be disbanded because the Russian military

intends to take action to stop the flooding through the use of chemical coagulants. He states that the people will be evacuated, but the *mokretsy*, who are officially considered a health risk,<sup>84</sup> will not be allowed to leave. Golemba also reveals that he knows the true reason for Banev's trip to Tashlinsk (i.e. Ira), but says that he has no intention to interfere.

Traveling deeper into the flooded zone, the group comes upon an energy barrier created by the *mokretsy* to surround their territory. As they pass beyond the barrier, the sky ominously changes to a sepia tone.<sup>85</sup> Arriving in the city, Banev joins a meeting of the UN Commission on Tashlinsk. The first commission member to speak declares the necessity for intervention to stop the spread of diseases, and suggests that they find a way to eliminate the unexplained infrared light being emitted from the zone. The second, Dr. Pavel Sumak (the Russian envoy), vehemently argues that the *mokretsy* represent an imminent threat to humanity and must be eliminated. He claims that the children who have adopted the *mokretsy* as their teachers are infected with irregular and inhuman ideas, and demands that the council vote to destroy the zone in its entirety. While other council members are aghast at this proposal – some even demanding the arrest of the Russian delegate – it appears to Banev that Sumak is simply expressing the perspective of the Russian military leadership.

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<sup>84</sup> As in the Strugatskiis' novella, the *mokretsy* are perceived as both sick humans and alien beings. They were born as humans, but transformed by an unknown epidemic into lepers with extremely high intelligence. These lepers are considered something inhuman or alien by the majority of the film's adult characters.

<sup>85</sup> Note that this is the same effect used in Tarkovskii's *Stalker*. A change from sepia to color film or, in this case, from color film to sepia, represents a transition between the real and fantastic worlds.

A young boy named Boria Kunitsa summons Banev and invites him to give a lecture at the local school. Dr. Golemba and a young woman, Diana, congratulate Banev on the fact that the children have shown an interest in him. They suggest that, instead of preparing a lecture, he should listen to the children's self-produced 24-hour radio program. When Banev tunes in, he is surprised to hear the children debating philosophical concepts and questions of human existence.

Like in the Strugatskiis' novella, Banev's lecture at the school transforms into a discussion on the topic of contemporary humanity.<sup>86</sup> The children challenge Banev's theories and his generation's perspective on the world, stating that they are not interested in living like their parents or ancestors. Summarizing their collective perspective on historical human development, one child says:

Excuse me for interrupting. Mr. Banev, you just found an apt symbol. Humankind is a hysterical, drunk, old man who has gone through hell. Yes, through hell. Because, unfortunately, he doesn't deserve better, and you know this perfectly well, yet you continue to assert that mankind is noble, that he didn't get enough in terms of things and happiness. As he sees it, that is, the right to trample, abuse, and use others. In summary, you just can't believe that you're already dead, that you created a world that became your gravestone and nothing more. When I say "you," I am not talking about you personally, Mr. Banev. I hope you understand everything (Lopushanskii 2006).

As the conversation progresses into a debate, Banev is forced to defend his generation while the children make sweeping claims about modern humanity. They state that humankind is at a critical point in its development, and that the world needs "a profound spiritual and sensual transformation" (Lopushanskii 2006). Ira, Banev's daughter, says: "If you want to know my opinion, I absolutely agree. I also see humankind standing at a precipice, at a choice: either

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<sup>86</sup> Significant portions of this conversation are taken word-for-word from the Strugatskiis' novella. I cite excerpts in my analysis of the Strugatskiis' *Gadkie lebedi*.

complete intellectual degradation or an unprecedented evolutionary leap in consciousness”

(ibid.). While Banev and the students are debating, a *mokrets* named Zinovii enters and introduces himself. After the lecture, the hero witnesses another of these strange beings teaching a group of children to levitate: forcing him to come to terms with their extraordinary nature. On the street Banev begs Ira to come with him out of the city, but she refuses – claiming that he has no right to take her away.

Dr. Sumak approaches Banev and attempts to convince him that the children are being controlled by the *mokretsy*. He explains that the *mokretsy* are believed to have a genetic disease, but that the symptoms did not appear until two weeks after the town’s mysterious event. Their hair fell out and their skin hardened, but they also became extremely intelligent and powerful. Sumak believes they are a new species, and that they attempt to hide this fact by wearing masks. He insists that the *mokretsy* are a threat to humankind and warns Banev not to become a “traitor to humanity” (ibid.).

In another episode, Diana and Banev find a *mokrets* dead in a basement – tortured to death by the military police. Diana insists that they return his body to the other *mokretsy* and guides Banev to a hidden compound. They open a large iron door to find a room flooded with rain and bright white light. Two *mokretsy* chastise Diana for bringing an outsider to their secret lair, but she convinces them that Banev is a friend and instructs the hero to forget the compound and everything he witnessed. Later, Banev shows Golemba a DVD that his daughter gave him – a sort of imprint of her consciousness – and asks for an honest explanation of the *mokretsy*. Golemba reveals that their disease does not spread by physical means, and that no one can be

infected unless they want to be. He claims that the only way to become a *mokrets* is to yearn for it: he repeats the phrase “*Nuzhna toska*” (ibid.).<sup>87</sup>

Banev wakes up in the morning to an air siren warning of a chemical attack on the town. He overhears that the military has decided to rain chemical coagulants over the city, and that they have refused to evacuate either the children or the *mokretsy*. When Banev learns that both Ira and Diana are stranded in the fallout zone, he steals a car and drives to the school. Inside, he finds Zinovii and convinces him to save the children. Zinovii says that he is not surprised that the government has chosen to exterminate the *mokretsy*, but that the children will never be able to go back to normal life: “He who has seen heaven will be changed. Forever” (ibid). Banev takes the children into a hermetically-sealed bunker, where he recites poetry as they wait out the attack.

Some time later, Banev walks through an underground compound to visit his daughter in a highly secretive psychiatric hospital. He finds that the hospital is run like a prison, and that the children are being reeducated to fit into society. Ira appears almost catatonic, and the maids who attend to her admit that she is on a number of narcotics. When they ask her to tell Banev what she is learning, Ira replies: “We watched a TV show. We had to guess who was the worst. Because we have to like what others like. We have to be like others. We have to force ourselves” (Lopushanskii 2006). Infuriated at her treatment, Banev storms to the office of the head doctor. There he finds a room lined with the skulls of children. He accosts the doctor, demanding that Ira be released and threatening a UN investigation of the hospital. Attempting to calm him down, another doctor takes Banev aside and explains that they are doing everything possible to help the

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<sup>87</sup> This phrase is central to discussions of the novel in online fan blogs and academic criticism.



children. He describes Ira as a wilting flower, unable to take root in foreign soil. Declaring that everything in the world causes the children pain, he insists that there is still hope they will eventually reacclimate. Banev goes to his daughter's cell and they sit in silence. The film ends as Ira wipes away fog from a window, revealing a clear, starry sky.

Lopushanskii's *Gadkie lebedi* takes the message of the Strugatskiis' novella and adapts it to the twenty-first century by creating a complex allegory for modern society. Like the mysterious zone of the Strugatskiis' *Piknik na obochine*, Lopushanskii's zone symbolizes a broad sociocultural liberalization. However, rather than referencing Khrushchev's Thaw (as the Strugatskii brothers did in their eponymous novella), *Gadkie lebedi* paints a contrast between generations split by the liberalization of the late 1980s and 1990s. In the process, it draws a recognizable parallel between the cultural constriction of the Stagnation period and that of the Putin era: offering a revealing perspective on Russian society in the mid-2000s.

The most immediate difference between the Strugatskiis' novella and its adaptation lies in their respective treatments of the adult characters. The Viktor Banev of Lopushanskii's film is nothing like the misanthropic drunkard of the brothers' text. Rather, he is a respected writer and UN envoy who has come to the militarized, flooded town with the sole purpose of saving his estranged daughter. Banev's actions mark him as an adventurous, intelligent, and ethical individual: a decidedly sympathetic hero. Neither he nor his colleagues drink excessively, and none of the film's adults are involved in the type of violent and lascivious acts that define their literary counterparts. In fact, this entire aspect of the Strugatskiis' text is completely

whitewashed – creating a significantly more empathetic view of the older generation (and, thereby, their intelligentsia counterparts).<sup>88</sup>

The only recognizable antagonist in Lopushanskii's adaptation is the Russian government (and by extension its enforcer, the military). Maintaining a shroud of secrecy around the event, the *mokretsy*, and the hyper-intelligent children, the bureaucracy created a barrier between the “new ideas” and the general public. When these ideas began to change the few individuals who were allowed access to Tashlinsk, the government decided to destroy their source. Against the recommendations of more than a dozen UN commissions, they launched a chemical attack on civilians (children and the terminally ill) based on an unfounded fear of invasion. Their violent overreaction, which resulted in the extinction of the *mokretsy* and the internment of the children, paints an unflattering picture of the Russian bureaucracy. Unable to compete with the progressive *mokretsy* on an intellectual level, the government makes use of secretive, oppressive, and brutal tactics to discredit and destroy them. Looking for parallels in Russian culture in the mid-2000s, one might say the same about Putin's approach to dealing with his detractors (e.g. Mikhail Khodorkovskii, Anna Politkovskaia, Boris Berezovskii), or the Russian military's approach to dealing with ostensibly free or independence-seeking nation states (e.g. Chechnya, Georgia).

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<sup>88</sup> If, as I posited in the previous section, the Strugatskiis' *Gadkie lebedi* creates an allegorical contrast between the older Soviet generation (i.e. those who grew up under Stalin) and the younger generation (i.e. those influenced by the Thaw), then one might say that Lopushanskii's adaptation paints a similar juxtaposition of those who matured before and after the fall of the Soviet Union. In the latter case, the older generation represents the dissident intelligentsia (i.e. those responsible for (re)defining Russian identity in the aftermath of *perestroika*), whereas the younger generation represents those with little to no experience of the Soviet system.

Viewed as an allegory for recent Russian history, *Gadkie lebedi* treats the Putin era as a period of cultural constriction following the profound liberalization of the late 1980s and 1990s (an exact parallel to the Strugatskiis' treatment of the Stagnation period and Thaw). It underscores a belief that the relationship between the government and the people has transformed in the twenty-first century: reverting to historical norms at the cost of individual freedoms and humanistic principles. Thus, if the children's belief that humanity is at a crossroads forms the center of their worldview, the tragic ending – in which they all end up in a psychiatric reeducation program – suggests that this society has crippled its brightest children and, thereby, its future.

While *Gadkie lebedi* features modern special effects and references contemporary cultural issues, it is notably dissimilar to its advertisement-ridden, pop-culture-obsessed blockbuster contemporaries. It contains no recognizable product placement, no visible electronic media, and no allusions to contemporary popular culture. Instead, the director makes use of artistic techniques developed by Russian *auteur* directors in the Soviet period to create a visually and intellectually appealing storyline. The infrared light used to distinguish the zone from the outside world is borrowed directly from Tarkovskii's *Stalker*. The conversations that elucidate the nature of the *mokretsy* are remarkably similar to those which describe Hari in *Solaris*. The long, drawn-out scenes and close-up portraits of the characters also seem to be borrowed from Tarkovskii's *fantastika* cinema, as does the use of water as a complex (albeit enigmatic) metaphor. Moreover, while the Strugatskiis' novella ends with a message of hope,

Lopushanskii's adaptation ends on an ambiguous and intellectually provocative note – a virtually universal feature of Soviet *auteur* cinema.<sup>89</sup>

*Gadkie lebedi* is an excellent example of post-Soviet art inspired by the unofficial counterculture of the Soviet period. An adaptation in the tradition of Tarkovskii (a dissident filmmaker), based on a work by the Strugatskiis (dissident writers), it expresses the perspective of a counterculture that has continued to thrive in the Putin era. *Gadkie lebedi* is critical of the government, laudatory of intellectuals, and clearly supportive of a progressive agenda. It promotes humanistic principles, provides a warning against regressive forms of social organization (authoritarianism, in particular), and illustrates a chimera in the search for a new form of Russian identity. As a window into the worldview of the post-Soviet intelligentsia, it indicates a fear that the struggle for a new, liberal identity is in danger – threatened by a government fearful of progressive ideas that is reverting to old methods of political and sociocultural control.

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<sup>89</sup> Note that this type of ending contrasts with those of the Stalin-era *fantastika* films I discussed in Chapter 1, both of which end with complete conflict resolution. This is not to suggest that all of mainstream Soviet cinema featured happy socialist endings (in the sense of communist victory and total conflict resolution), but it is notable that enigmatic, open-ended conclusions are more common within the liberal or “dissident” trend in Russian *fantastika* cinema (e.g. *Stalker*, *Solaris*, and *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein*) than in the “official” mainstream (e.g. *Gibel' sensatsii*, *Taina dvukh okeanov*, and *Tumannost' andromedy*).

### Boris and Arkadii Strugatskii's *Obitaemyi ostrov*

In his *Kommentarii k proidennomu*, Boris Strugatskii describes the history of *Obitaemyi ostrov*'s creation in intriguing detail. Explaining that the decision in 1967 to write a straightforward adventure novel was motivated by recent negative experiences with the bureaucracy, he writes:

I remember quite well how, discouraged and angry, we said to each other: "Oh, you don't want satire? You no longer need Saltykov-Shchedrin? Do you no longer care about modern problems? Very good! You will receive a mindless, brainless, absolutely toothless novel – entertaining, but without a single idea – about the adventures of a Boy-Komsomolets from the XXII century. . . ." Silly fellows, it was as if we were going to punish one of the powers that be for ignoring the serious issues and problems that we offer. To punish comrade Farfurkis with a frivolous novel! It's funny. It's funny and a little embarrassing to remember it now. But then, in the summer and autumn of '67, when all the journals that were friendly to us one after another rejected both our *Skazka* and *Gadkie lebedi*, we didn't see anything funny in what was happening (Strugatskii 2003, 181).

Desperate for income and distraught at the negative attention leveled at them by the bureaucracy, the Strugatskiis set out to write an ideologically subdued work that would be certain to pass censorship. In the process of writing this "mindless" sci-fi adventure story, however, they found themselves creating an allegory for modern society.

We took to writing *Obitaemyi ostrov* without enthusiasm, but very soon the work captivated us. It turned out that it is a devilishly fascinating occupation – to write a toothless, thoughtless, deeply entertaining novel! All the more so because it soon stopped seeming so toothless to us. The emission towers, the freaks (*vyrodki*), and the Combat Guard all stood in their places, like bullets in a clip – everything found its prototype in our beloved reality, everything seemed a bearer of subtext – as though against our will, as if by itself, like a multi-colored chunk of lollipop in a kind of magical kaleidoscope, turning chaos and random hodgepodge into an elegant, ordered, and symmetrical picture (Strugatskii 2003, 181-182).

The parallels to Soviet history that the Strugatskiis interwove into their text caused the censors to balk at the idea of publishing it. Boris Strugatskii goes on to describe the arduous process of revision required by the censors, ultimately coming to the conclusion that the end result was a compromise displeasing to both parties.

The book didn't come out in September, nor did it come out in November. In January of 1971 this history came to an end – the instructive history of the publication of a cheerful, absolutely ideologically consistent, purely entertaining story about a *komsomolets* from the XXII century, conceived and written by its authors mainly for the sake of money.

An interesting question: who really won this hopeless battle between writers and the state machine? The authors, after all, still managed to release their offspring, even if in a highly mutilated form. But did the censors and leadership manage to achieve their goal at all – to uproot from the novel the "free spirit," allusions, "unruly associations," and all sorts of subtexts? To some extent – of course. The mutilated text, without any doubt, lost a lot of its sharpness and satirical focus, but to castrate it, I think, the leadership also failed. The novel was still kicked around long and joyfully by a variety of well-wishers. But although their critical tone rarely rose above accusations of the authors' "disrespect for the Soviet space program" (meaning Maksim's dismissive attitude toward work in the Free Search organization), despite this, the authorities' cautious and unfriendly attitude toward *Obitaemyi ostrov*, even in its "corrected" version,<sup>90</sup> is visibly quite clear. On the other hand, most likely, it was just inertia (Strugatskii 2003, 189).

*Obitaemyi ostrov*, therefore, is an illustration both of the Soviet bureaucracy's control over artistic production and the Strugatskiis' ability to subvert the censorship apparatus in order to create ideologically meaningful works. Juxtaposed against the other novels discussed in this dissertation, however, one might say that *Obitaemyi ostrov* is the brothers' most serious attempt to create literature in line with the wishes of the Soviet leadership.

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<sup>90</sup> *Obitaemyi ostrov* was first serialized in highly-redacted form in *Neva* in 1969, then published in a more complete edition in *Detskaia literatura* in 1971 (McGuire 1985, 61 and 75). The publication to which Boris Strugatskii refers is the 1971 edition.

The plot of *Obitaemyi ostrov* has been summarized by literary scholar Patrick McGuire in a particularly efficient and insightful way:

*Inhabited Island* [*Obitaemyi ostrov*] takes place in a society with technology about equal to (in some areas, in advance of) that of the modern USSR, but which has gone through a nuclear war. Neighboring countries (Europe?) have been utterly destroyed and barbarian hordes now roam there, and some of the regions of the country where the story takes place (the non-Russian republics?) have assumed independence, but much of the country is more or less intact, and order is gradually being restored under the leadership of an oligarchical dictatorship. Again, the dictatorship has Soviet characteristics mixed together with those of other tyrannies. For example, an organization called the Legion looks as much like the SS as like the KGB.

The hero, Maksim, is a young earthman marooned after a spaceship crash. He is shocked by the injustice he sees about him, but cannot decide what to do about it. First, he thinks that the Legion is an instrument of order, and he accepts an invitation to join. When he realizes his mistake, he joins the underground, but he finds that they are so ruthless that there is little hope that things would be any better if the revolutionaries took over. He considers trying to rouse the barbarians against the oligarchs, but he is dissuaded – the barbarians would hardly pack up and leave when they had overthrown the regime. Finally, he acts on his own and destroys the oligarchs' central transmitter, which had been sending out signals conditioning the population to loyalty. Even this turns out to have been a mistake. One of the oligarchs is actually an earthman, an "agent of Galactic Security." Maksim has touched off a revolution before it has been properly prepared. The novel ends at this point, but from a reference in "The Kid" we may deduce that the situation was salvaged (McGuire 1985, 72-73).

The Strugatskiis' *Obitaemyi ostrov* features a situation similar to that found in their *Trudno byt' bogom* (Potts 1991, 47): a hero from a utopian Earth ventures to a foreign planet, first attempting to right the wrongs of an alien society, then acting violently and with rage against its symbols of oppression. Maksim, the novel's protagonist, is similar to *Trudno byt' bogom*'s Anton in almost every respect. The novels' otherworldly settings and anti-totalitarian messages are almost identical, as are their use of fictional pseudo-histories to allegorize the Soviet past. However,

whereas *Trudno byt' bogom* is a rather dark and pessimistic tale, *Obitaemyi ostrov* is more readily comparable to their less-developed – but more optimistic – earlier works.



### Fedor Bondarchuk's *Obitaemyi ostrov* and *Obitaemyi ostrov: skhvatka*

*Obitaemyi ostrov* maintains a deft balance between ideological depth and pure entertainment, but noticeably favors the latter. Viewed in the context of Soviet sociocultural history, it may be understood as a (forced) concession by the Strugatskiis to the Brezhnev-era bureaucracy. Perhaps it is for this reason that Fedor Bondarchuk, a central figure of the commercialist camp in post-Soviet cinema, chose to adapt it to the screen. That is, in a sort of challenge to the aesthetes, he adapted a novel by icons of dissident culture – one considered to be among their least subversive – into a flashy and ostentatious blockbuster. The fact that the ethical and ideological messages of *Obitaemyi ostrov* are relatively subdued in Bondarchuk's adaptations (Khagi 2015, 210) suggests a belief among the proponents of commercialist cinema that they were capable of creating inspiring, beloved cinematic classics without resorting to the (perceived) heady styles, structures, and pedantic messages characteristic of *auteur* cinema. The adaptation of *Obitaemyi ostrov* gave those who favored blockbuster cinema a chance to challenge the ideology of the post-Soviet aesthetes: undermining their insistence on artistic purity by adapting a dissident text in a highly-commercialized way.

As discussed previously, the popular success of Bekmambetov's *Dozor* films paved the way for other *fantastika* blockbuster projects in the vein of national popular cinema. Fedor Bondarchuk's adaptation of the Strugatskiis' *Obitaemyi ostrov*, which premiered as two feature-length films in 2008 and 2009, is among the most expensive projects ever undertaken in Russian

cinema.<sup>91</sup> Like Peter Fleischmann's *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu Sein*, it represents a "serious, large-scale effort to produce a high-quality, internationally successful sf blockbuster that could compete with Hollywood films" (Schwartz 2015, 221). However, unlike Fleischmann's adaptation, which suffered from the negative economic and sociocultural circumstances of the late 1980s (ibid.), the *Obitaemyi ostrov* series succeeded in drawing a noteworthy amount of both domestic and international attention. Employing techniques, tropes, and approaches from international (namely, Hollywood) cinema, Bondarchuk created a highly entertaining and commercially successful *fantastika* film adaptation of a work by formerly dissident authors.

While it is tempting to view Bondarchuk's project as a continuation of the "Tarkovskian" tradition of artistic adaptation, *Obitaemyi ostrov* and *Obitaemyi ostrov: skhvatka* are noticeably different from their *auteur* predecessors. In "Genre Film, Spectacle and the Strugatskii Brothers in Fyodor Bondarchuk's *The Inhabited Island*," literary scholar Sofya Khagi writes:

As a blockbuster with Hollywood-level aspirations, *Obitaemyi ostrov* takes the opposite course from renowned transpositions of a popular genre into auteur cinema, such as the screen version of *Solaris* (Tarkovsky Russia 1972), *Stalker* (Tarkovsky Russia 1979) or *Dni zatmenii* (*Days of the Eclipse*; Sokurov Russia 1988), as well as *Hard to Be a God* by Alexei German. More importantly, the films diverge not only from the above-mentioned transpositions of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961) and the Strugatskiis' *Piknik na obochine* (*Roadside Picnic*; 1972), *Za milliard let do kontsa sveta* (*One Billion Years before the End of the World*; 1976) and *Trudno byt' bogom* (*Hard to Be a God*; 1964), but also from the Strugatskiis' own departure from an action-oriented, technophilic generic form into a more philosophical, techno-skeptical and politically oppositional sf. Special effects induce passive consumption; dialogue, even if taken verbatim from the Strugatskiis, tends to be delivered in shouts; and the deployment of spectacle masks conceptual vacuity even as it delivers the same (Khagi 2015, 210).

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<sup>91</sup> According to Kinopoisk.ru, the aggregate budget for both films was \$36.6 million US dollars. For comparison, the combined budget for Bekmambetov's *Dozor* films was \$8.4 million (Kinopoisk 2019c).

Bondarchuk's films elevate entertainment over intellectual complexity and favor Hollywood cinematic styles over traditional Soviet models of artistic adaptation. However, while Khagi claims that "*Obitaemyi ostrov I & II* reimagine the novel with the trappings of a global sf blockbuster that glamourizes technology, overindulging in generic pastiche, special effects and filmic clichés, and reprocesses narrative into spectacle" (Khagi 2015, 203), I will show that their message is a fitting commentary on contemporary sociocultural and political conditions. Hidden beneath layers of international pop culture references, Hollywood-style cinematography, and flashy special effects is a revealing perspective on Russian society in the first decade of the Putin era.

Khagi's primary argument, that "purging the Strugatskiis' text of complexities and blunting its political critique, Bondarchuk ends up with a run-of-the-mill, Western-style commercialized fantasy" (Khagi 2015, 214), illustrates a common sentiment among critics. Especially in contrast to Soviet-era *auteur* adaptations of the brothers' works, inspired almost exclusively by domestic models and much more evidently ideologically complex, the *Obitaemyi ostrov* films are commonly characterized as "Americanized," flashy, and intellectually dull.<sup>92</sup> However, as I will show in my analysis, Bondarchuk's films exhibit a humanistic and anti-authoritarian perspective distinctly in line with those found in Tarkovskii, Fleischmann, and Lopushanskii's adaptations. Rather than an ideologically colorless, pointlessly flashy, mindless blockbuster, Bondarchuk created an entertaining and intellectually inspiring commentary on modern circumstances.

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<sup>92</sup> This is based on my personal analysis of newspaper articles, blogs, and reviews.

Aside from the Stalker from *Piknik na obochine*, Maksim Kammerer is the Strugatskiis' most well-known and celebrated character.<sup>93</sup> Bondarchuk's *Obitaemyi ostrov* follows Maksim, a young adventurer from a utopian Earth, as he navigates the complexities of a post-apocalyptic society after crash landing on a foreign planet (*Saraksh*). Like Anton from *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein*, Maksim is capable of supernatural feats and has access to advanced technology. However, while Anton is directed by a team of colleagues in space (and, indirectly, strategists on Earth), Maksim is entirely cut off from his civilization. The hero's decisions are based on personal motivations and his own understanding of the planet's social structures and inhabitants – unabetted by outside influence. The narrative of *Obitaemyi ostrov* is, in this sense, naturally individualistic. Through Maksim, Bondarchuk expresses a message of personal freedom and responsibility not dissimilar to that found in Bekmambetov's *Dozor* series.

Maksim's interactions with individuals and groups on *Saraksh* create an allegorical connection between Bondarchuk's fictional world and contemporary Russia. Shortly after crash landing, Maksim is sent to a psychiatric facility by a group of bureaucrats who attempt to forcefully reeducate him. After his release, Maksim joins the local army with the help of his military escort and new friend: Gai Gaal. This army is driven by violent and heartless leaders, and consists of soldiers who are either brainwashed into joining or forcibly conscripted from lower-class neighborhoods. The callous and oppressive tactics employed by the captain –

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<sup>93</sup> Like the Stalker, there is a great deal of fanfiction and analysis devoted to Maksim. There have been three video games based on the Strugatskiis' *Obitaemyi ostrov* in which Maksim is the main character. Notably, Boris Strugatskii claimed that the Maksim of Bondarchuk's films was a fitting representation of the character the brothers originally imagined (Grachev 2009).

Chachu – drive Maksim to abandon his unit and join a rebel faction. He pays for this betrayal, which results in the escape of a group of prisoners condemned to death, by being shot by Chachu in cold blood and left in the wilderness to die. Like the Russian army in Lopushanskii’s *Gadkie lebedi*, the army Maksim joins (and eventually fights both for and against) is corrupt and brutal: acting to eradicate dissent through oppression and violence.

The “Unknown Fathers,” a group of secretive oligarchs, control society through the use of special mind-controlling rays broadcast from radio towers. They employ nationalist propaganda to drive the population toward their personal political and economic goals, creating false narratives concerning international conflicts and contemporary social issues. Not unlike *Gazprom-Media*, the state-owned company that consolidated control of the former Soviet media empire in the early 2000s (Beumers 2009, 241), the Unknown Fathers effectively have a monopoly on information distributed through the mass media. When the mind-controlling rays are broadcast (at 10am and 10pm daily), the population is overtaken by mindless, yet passionate, patriotic chanting.

The *Vyrodki*, people immune to the brainwashing influence of the rays, are terrorized by violent seizures brought on by the twice-daily broadcasts. These individuals – several of whom become Maksim’s friends – are intelligent and brave anti-government activists who seek to bring down the quasi-fascist society created by the Unknown Fathers. Their belief that society has abandoned humanistic principles in favor of isolation and chauvinistic nationalism – relying on propaganda, the state security apparatus, and the military to control the population and wipe out dissent – echoes the anti-totalitarian, panhumanistic message of Lopushanskii’s *Gadkie lebedi*.

Correspondingly, the *Obitaemyi ostrov* films paint the *Vyrodki*<sup>94</sup> – clear stand-ins for the twenty-first-century Russian intelligentsia – as decidedly sympathetic (particularly in contrast to their literary counterparts). Maksim defends and fights for them, ultimately installing the survivors in positions of power following his violent overthrow of the planet’s leadership. Tragic depictions of the government’s imprisonment, torture, and murder of the *Vyrodki* illustrate the dangers of regressive (i.e. oppressive) policies and serve to outline a firmly anti-authoritarian message.

It is interesting to note that the Unknown Fathers are also *Vyrodki*: that is, they are immune to the brainwashing influence of the rays, but are tortured with violent seizures on a daily basis. This is a crucial element of the parallel between Bondarchuk’s fictional planet and modern Russia. The Unknown Fathers are fully cognizant of the fact that their broadcasts spread false propaganda and cause intense pain to a portion of the population, yet they use the towers to encourage vigilante justice against others aware of this fact.<sup>95</sup> The *Vyrodki* – who they label as terrorists – serve as an effective scapegoat for the problems of their society. By framing minority groups as enemies of the people (e.g. homosexuals, journalists, North Caucasians, anti-Putin oppositionists), the contemporary Russian leadership has created similar scapegoats in the twenty-first century. The fact that the Unknown Fathers begin a war against a neighboring state specifically to shore up domestic support, furthermore, may be understood as a controversial (perhaps “dissident”) commentary on actions taken by the Russian government in Afghanistan

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<sup>94</sup> *Vyrodki* is commonly translated into English as “degenerates” or “monsters.”

<sup>95</sup> Like the “Enlightened Spy” in the Strugatskiis’ *Piknik na obochine*, the Unknown Fathers are aware that their actions are counterintuitive and backward, yet they embrace their oppressive occupations with zealous fortitude.

and Chechnya. Moreover, if we accept the analogy between this fictional government and that of the Russian Federation, we might recognize a rather cutting commentary on perceived inadequacies in the Russian military. For the crucial battle in the war (which takes place in the second film), most of the soldiers are forcibly conscripted and sent untrained and inappropriately-armed into an absolute massacre: only Maksim and two *Vyrodki* survive.

For the sake of argument, let's say that the parallels I have drawn between modern Russia and Saraksh are imagined or coincidental – that they naturally arise as a consequence of adapting an anti-authoritarian text, or that they were aimed at Stalinist totalitarianism or Nazi fascism, rather than Putinist chauvinistic nationalism. Let's assume (or, rather, pretend) that Bondarchuk had no intention of criticizing contemporary political circumstances, and was exclusively interested in turning a famous novel into a commercially successful film adaptation. Nevertheless, even through this very narrow frame of analysis, the fictional macrocosm developed in the *Obitaemyi ostrov* series naturally lends itself to broader interpretation. That is, even if the director had no intention of promoting controversial ideas, the allegorical framework he developed encourages viewers to evaluate contemporary circumstances against the backdrop of the film's fictional world. Because that world is a post-apocalyptic police state, the parallels to modern reality are, naturally, predominantly negative.

The plot of Bondarchuk's *Obitaemyi ostrov* series is remarkably similar to that of the Strugatskiis' novel. Maksim's pursuit of justice in the Land of the Unknown Fathers forces him to come to terms with many uncomfortable truths. After assisting the *Vyrodki* in a bloody attack on a broadcast tower, Maksim realizes that the rebels are incapable of effecting change on their

own. His pursuits beyond the borders of the empire also lead to dejection as he comes to understand that the other societies on the planet are either too weak to care for themselves or too barbaric to risk allowing them to take power in the Unknown Fathers' territory. Following the murder of Gai and kidnapping of Rada Gaal (Gai's sister and the hero's love interest), Maksim begins a personal war against the Unknown Fathers and destroys the central core of the mind-controlling towers. He unseats the oligarchs, most of whom have already killed one another, and puts members of the *Vyrodki* rebel group into positions of power. However, as Maksim learns in the final scenes of the film, Strannik – one of the Unknown Fathers – is actually a colleague from Earth sent to help guide the planet into the next stage of civilization. Maksim's interference, although inspired by his wish to free a society from tyranny, forces the start of a revolution before it was properly prepared. Notably, while the hero accepts that his actions may have caused unforeseen consequences, he insists that any future society planned by the Galactic Counsel (of which Strannik is a member) be free of mind control. Advocating for personal freedom – even in the face of chaos and social collapse – Maksim demands that the citizens of Saraksh be allowed to decide the future for themselves.

It is interesting to note that the second film of Bondarchuk's series, *Obitaemyi ostrov: skhvatka*, opens with an unbearably long (over three minutes) and notably shallow summary of the first film. For those unfamiliar with the Strugatskiis' work, the rapid-fire description of the circumstances on *Saraksh* is virtually useless from an interpretive standpoint. However, while this dumbed-down retelling might appear conspicuous in a work of *auteur* cinema, it is somehow befitting to Bondarchuk's series. This is because, like Sergei Lomkin's *Rokovye iaitsa* and Timur



Bekmambetov's *Dozor* series, the *Obitaemyi ostrov* films succeed in straddling the line between aesthetic and commercialist demands for cinema. On the one hand, the flashy special effects, Hollywood-style cinematography, and constant references to international pop culture make them attractive to even the most undiscerning viewer – including those to whom a complex plot summary might not appeal. On the other hand, the parabolic connections between conditions on *Saraksh* and those in the Putin-era Russian Federation create an intellectually stimulating perspective on contemporary society. Thus, although Bondarchuk's films evidently favor commercialist methods, they express ideas that are distinctly in line with those developed in contemporary *auteur* cinema (including *Gadkie lebedi* and *Trudno byt' bogom*). It is for this reason, perhaps, that *Obitaemyi ostrov* has come to be (contradictorily) labeled both an “anti-Putin film” (Norris 2012, 310) and a “run-of-the-mill, Western-style commercialized fantasy” (Khagi 2015, 214).

### Viktor Pelevin's *Generation 'P'*

One day, having smoked some really good grass, he accidentally discovered the foundational economic law of the post-socialist formation: the initial accumulation of capital is also final (Pelevin 1999, 10).

Viktor Pelevin's *Generation 'P'* is a fantastic postmodernist satire of 1990s Russian society. First published by *Vagrius*<sup>96</sup> in 1999, the novel's entertaining plot and cutting commentary on post-Soviet life made it an instant cult classic. Incorporating Eastern mysticism, psychedelic exploration, and a new (albeit grotesque) model for understanding contemporary consumerism, Pelevin created a novel approach to conceptualizing Russian national identity in the post-Soviet space.

Like Sergei Lukianenko's *Nochnoi dozor*, *Generation 'P'* is set in contemporary Moscow, follows a sympathetic male hero, and contains an allegorical model for modern reality. However, while these works also share an interest in psychological exploration and ancient (read: non-Orthodox) religion, Pelevin's novel is grittier and considerably less pedantic. That is, if Lukianenko's story can be read as an apology for a worldview based on freedom and personal responsibility, Pelevin's is more of a gut-wrenching criticism of the cynicism and ideological chaos that provoked the former's creation. *Generation 'P'* paints life in the 1990s as a sort of waking nightmare: defined by consumerism, egoism, and overwhelming influence from foreign culture.

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<sup>96</sup> *Vagrius* is an independent publishing house founded in 1992. "Vagrius" is a combination of the first two letters of the founders' last names: Oleg Vasil'ev, Vladimir Grigor'ev, and Gleb Uspenskii.

As a Russian postmodernist, Pelevin's writing features a mixture of contemporary *byt* and absurd symbolism. Literary scholar N. N. Shneidman's characterization of postmodernism in *Russian Literature, 1995-2002: On the Threshold of the New Millennium* is an apt illustration of the author's style.

It is well known that in postmodern art there is always a fusion of forms and confusion of realms. A combination of fact and fiction, with emphasis on improvisation, play, and abstraction. Form is not conjunctive but disjunctive, and the world described is not hierarchical but fragmented, and in a state of anarchy. Postmodernism does not aspire towards accuracy of knowledge. It denies the very ideas of reality and truth, and it elevates relativism to an end in itself. This literature destroys affinities, and it aims at the marginal and impersonal. It is characterized by a high degree of reflexivity, intertextuality, skepticism, irony, and parody (Shneidman 2004, 16).

*Generation 'P'* expresses a fragmented, abstract, yet intellectually provocative approach to understanding the world. It uses a fantastic simulacrum for contemporary reality as a platform for self-reflection, deconstructing the foundations of the post-Soviet worldview by painting everyday systems and situations in absurdist terms. In *Russian Postmodernist Metafiction*, literary scholar Nina Kolesnikoff writes:

The merging of the quasi-realistic and the overtly hallucinatory space is introduced in many Russian postmodernist texts, including Pelevin's *Chapaev i pustota* and *Generation P*, Sharov's *Do I vo vremia*, Gosteva's *Travel Agents*, and others. In the majority of these texts, the interpolation of hallucinatory experiences into the fictional world is realistically motivated by the use of recreational drugs or the experimental drug treatment of mentally ill patients. What makes this strategy ontologically unstable is the blurring of the boundaries between the two realms, the displacement of objects and characters between them, and the overall sense of uncertainty as to how to interpret the text. Probably the best example of the postmodernist merging of the fictional and the hallucinatory is provided by *Generation P*, which introduces extensive hallucinatory experiences caused by the protagonist's use of hard drugs. As could be expected from a postmodernist novel, these hallucinatory experiences are presented in the text abruptly and without the overt markings of the transitions between the fictional and hallucinatory realms. As a result, the reader is frequently confused about the

narrative level, possible crossing points between the fictional and hallucinatory spaces, and the overall significance of the merging of the two realms (Kolesnikoff 2011, 95).

The postmodernist method of playing with form and blurring boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, creates a situation in which no moral lesson or dogmatic theory can find grounding. As soon as a model arises, it is instantly deconstructed or warped into something fantastic (and, in Pelevin's case, often grotesque). The author's (pseudo-)ontology is a chimera: like a mirage, it appears convincingly real in the abstract, but disappears upon closer inspection.

The protagonist of *Generation 'P'*, Vavilen Tatarskii, experiences altered states of reality while taking part in 1990s Moscow's drug culture and developing catchy slogans for foreign name brands. Cocaine, LSD, hallucinogenic mushrooms, and imported vodka are the primary means by which the hero escapes reality and copes with his rapidly changing environment, but he is also driven by a powerful enigmatic force – symbols of which come from ancient Sumerian mythology. Vavilen's transition from a kiosk clerk, to an advertising prodigy, to a digital celebrity, to the supernatural husband of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar is depicted as a sort of half-waking daydream (or nightmare). Correspondingly, the hero's worldview is in a state of constant flux. He is consistently forced to come to terms with new "levels" of reality on a pseudo-spiritual quest fueled by drugs and a rapid rise in socioeconomic status.

Capitalism, consumerism, and foreign name brands play a central role in Pelevin's satire of 1990s Russian culture. The opening text of *Generation 'P'*, a sort of pseudo-copyright notice, is a useful illustration of the author's style.

All trademarks mentioned herein are the property of their respected owners and all rights are reserved. Names of goods and politicians do not indicate actually existing

market products and pertain only to the projections of elements of the commercial-political information space, forcibly induced as objects of the individual mind. The author asks readers to perceive them only in this capacity. Other similarities are unintentional. The author's opinions may not coincide with his point of view (Pelevin 1999, 1).

Pelevin satirizes copyright conventions and intentionally undermines his own credibility as a reliable narrator (or, rather, “author”). Throughout the remainder of the novel, he employs what often feels like a deluge of name brands and English-language buzzwords to create the impression of a cultural obsession with foreign products and culture. The opening paragraphs tie Vavilen’s generation directly to an icon of Western consumerism – Pepsi-Cola – then turn to a commentary on the conditions preceding and following the fall of the Soviet Union.

Once upon a time in Russia there really was a carefree, youthful generation that smiled at the summer, the sea, and the sun – and chose Pepsi.

Now it is difficult to determine why this happened. Probably, it wasn’t only on account of the wonderful taste quality of this beverage. And not because of the caffeine, which keeps children needing another dose, securely introducing them from childhood to the cocaine freeway. And not even on account of a banal bribe – one wants to believe that the party bureaucrat on whom the conclusion of the contract depended simply tried and fell in love with this dark bubbling liquid from the depths of a soul that had lost its faith in communism.

Most likely though, the reason was that the ideologists of the USSR believed that there was only one Truth. Therefore, for generation “P” there was no choice, and the children of the Soviet seventies chose “Pepsi” just as their parents had chosen Brezhnev.

Be that as it may, these children, lying on the beach in the summer, for a long time looked at the cloudless blue horizon, drank warm Pepsi-Cola, poured into glass bottles in the city Novorossiysk, and dreamed that the distant forbidden world on the other side of the sea would someday enter their lives.

Ten years passed, and this world began to enter – at first cautiously and with a polite smile, but then increasingly more boldly and confidently. One of its business cards

was a clip advertising “Pepsi-Cola” – a clip which, as many researchers noted, was a turning point in the development of all of world culture. It compared two monkeys. One of them drank “normal soda” and as a result appeared capable of fulfilling a few simple logical actions with cubes and sticks. The other drank Pepsi-Cola. Hooting happily, it drove off in a Jeep in the direction of the sea in the embrace of two young girls, who clearly didn’t give a damn about women’s equality (when you have to deal closely with monkeys, it is better not to think about such things, because equality and inequality would be equally difficult for the soul).

If you think about it, it’s easy to understand that the issue is not in Pepsi-Cola, but in money, with which it is directly connected. We are led to this conclusion first of all by classic Freudian associations, conditioned by the color of the product; and secondly, a logical conclusion – imbibing Pepsi-Cola allows one to buy fancy cars. But we’re not going to analyze this clip in depth (though maybe it’s there that we might find an explanation for why the so-called “sixties generation” persistently calls generation “P” shit-eaters). For us it is only important that the ultimate symbol of generation “P” became a monkey in a jeep (Pelevin 1999, 2-3).

In Pelevin’s novel, Pepsi is both a symbol for the infiltration of Western capitalism into Russian life and an emblem for the “seventies” generation: those who experienced Soviet collapse as young adults. A “creature of the current age and product of the new Russian conditions” (Shneidman 2004, 95), Vavilen may be viewed as a symbol for this generation and, perhaps, a simulacrum for the author himself.

The hero’s psychotropic and pseudo-spiritual experiences elucidate alluring models for conceptualizing contemporary reality. One of the most notable of these models is described in a conversation between Vavilen and the spirit of Che Guevara. After imbibing alcohol and hallucinogens, Vavilen uses a ouija board to summon the former Argentinian revolutionary for inspiration on his current advertising project. Instead of responding to his questions, however, Che begins a lengthy and dense philosophical polemic on contemporary consumerism.

That great champion of the liberation of humanity, Siddhartha Gautama, has indicated in many of his works that the principle reason for the lamentable condition of man in this life is first and foremost the very conception of man's existence, life and lamentable condition - that is to say, the dualism that imposes the division into subject and object of something that in actual fact has never existed and never will.

In speaking of the fact that dualism is as engendered by the arbitrary division of the world into subject and object, the Buddha was concerned with subject-object division of the first type. The major distinguishing feature of the Dark Age lies in the decisive influence exerted on the life of man by subject-object division of the second type, which in the time of the Buddha simply did not exist. . . .

In order to explain what is meant by objects of the first and second types, let us take a simple example, a television set. When it is off, it is an object of the first type. This is simply a box with a glass wall, which we are free to watch or not watch. When an individual's gaze falls upon a dark screen, the movement of his or her eyes is controlled exclusively by internal nerve impulses or the psychological process taking place in his or her consciousness. . . . But when a television is turned on, it is transformed from an object of the first type into an object of the second type. It becomes a phenomenon of an entirely different order. And, although the person looking at the screen does not notice this customary transformation, it is truly immense. For the viewer the television disappears as a material object that possesses weight, size and other physical properties. Instead of this the viewer has the sensation of being present in a different space, a sensation familiar to all who are assembled here (Pelevin 1999, 84-85).

He uses the ancient Buddhist paradigm of subject-object division to create a model for understanding the function of a television set – not as a physical screen, but as a portal to another reality. This reality, he goes on to explain, subjugates and then absorbs the viewer into itself.

The question is - who is actually present? Can we say that it is the viewer himself? Let us repeat the question, since it is extremely important: is it possible to say that the television is being watched by the individual who is watching it?

We assert that it is not, for the following reason. When the individual viewed the television while it was switched off, the movement of his or her eyes and the flow of his or her attention were controlled by his own voluntary impulses, chaotic though they may have been. The dark screen with no image of any kind did not exert any influence over them, or if it did, it was only as a background. When it is switched on,

a television almost never transmits a static view from a single motionless camera, and therefore the image on it is not a background. Quite the contrary, this image changes at an extremely rapid rate. Every few seconds there is either a change of camera angle or a fade into close-up on some object, or a switch to a different camera - the image is constantly being modified by the cameraman and the producer who stands behind him. This changing of the image is known as technomodification.

We ask you to pay particularly close attention at this point, since our next thesis is rather difficult to grasp, although in essence it is extremely simple. In addition, the feeling might arise that we are dealing with something that is insignificant. But we make bold to assert that we are in fact dealing with the most real psychological phenomenon of the end of the second millennium. The changes in the image produced by various technomodifications can be correlated with a virtual psychological process in which the observer is forced to switch his attention from one event to another and select the most interesting content from what is taking place - that is, to manage his own attention as the makers of the programme manage it. This psychological process creates its own virtual subject, which for the duration of the television programme exists in place of the individual, fitting into his or her consciousness like a hand into a rubber glove.

This is similar to the condition of possession by a spirit. The difference lies in the fact that in this case the spirit does not exist; all that does exist are the symptoms of possession. This is a virtual spirit, but from the moment the viewer entrusts the program-makers with redirecting his or her attention at will from object to object, he or she effectively becomes this spirit, and the spirit, which does not actually exist, possesses this viewer and millions of others. What is taking place could appropriately be called the experience of collective non-existence, since the virtual subject that replaces the viewer's actual consciousness is absolutely non-existent - it is merely an effect created by the collective efforts of editors, cameramen and producers. However, for the individual watching the television there is nothing more real than this virtual subject (Pelevin 2000, 86).

Through obsequience to and absorption by the object (e.g. a television program), the viewer transforms into a virtual, false self. According to Che, this pseudo-self represents a new evolution in humankind: “Homo Zapiens” (a play on the homo sapiens/homo soveticus model). The Zapiens, who zap between TV channels during commercials and are themselves zapped by the “technomodifications” of the visual media they experience, are motivated exclusively by a



predetermined set of impulses and form individual cells within a larger being: "Oranus." The Oranus theory, one might say, is the definitive model for understanding contemporary consumerist culture in Pelevin's work.

Oranus, therefore, in the process of its evolution (and it is at a stage of development close to the level of the mollusk) develops a semblance of the simplest nervous system – the so-called "media," the basis of which is television. This nervous system transmits nerve impulses throughout its virtual organism, controlling the activity of the monadic cells.

There are three types of these impulses. They are called oral, anal, and displacing wow-impulses (from the commercial ejaculation "wow!"). The oral wow-impulse induces a cell to ingest money, in order to eliminate suffering from the conflict between his image of himself and the image of his ideal "super-self" created by advertising. Note that it's not about the things that money can buy to make this perfect "I" – it's about the money itself. Indeed, many millionaires dress in rags and drive cheap cars – but to afford it, you have to be a millionaire. A beggar in such a situation would suffer unspeakably from cognitive dissonance. Thus, many poor people use the last of their money to dress well and expensively.

The anal wow-impulse induces the cell to eliminate money in order to experience pleasure from the coincidence of the above-mentioned images. Inasmuch as the two described actions – the consumption of money and its excretion – contradict each other, the anal wow-impulse acts in a hidden form, and the person seriously believes that pleasure is not associated with the act of spending money, but with the possession of one or another object. Although it is obvious that, for example, a watch for fifty thousand dollars as a physical object is not able to give a person more pleasure than a watch for fifty – it's all about the amount of money.

The displacing (wow) impulse suppresses and displaces from an individual's consciousness all psychological processes that might hinder total identification with a cell of oranus. It occurs when there are no oral-anal components in the mental stimulus. The displacing impulse is a jamming signal that blocks the transmission of unwanted radio stations generating interference. Its action is beautifully expressed in the proverbs "Money talks, bullshit walks" and "If you are so clever show me your money." Without this effect, oranus could not force people to play the role of its cells. Under the influence of the displacing impulse, blocking all the subtle mental processes that are not directly related to the movement of money, the world begins to be perceived solely as the embodiment of oranus. This leads to a frightening result. Here's

how one broker from the London real estate exchange described his vision: “the world is the place where business meets money” (Pelevin 2000, 96).

Oranus, therefore, is a metaphor for a society enslaved by television, advertising, and money. Individuals are unconsciously coopted into the organism, and the virtual beings (or “monadic cells”) that they become are both unaware of and controlled by the oral, anal, and displacing impulses. In a sense, anyone who views a television cannot truly be free, because they become subject to the image of a super-self – a state of being they cannot achieve without oral and anal impulses (i.e. “the consumption and excretion of money”). With this grotesque model, related from the perspective of a famous Marxist who became an icon of capitalist culture,<sup>97</sup> Pelevin satirizes post-Soviet consumerism and outlines a new system of oppression that arose as a consequence of Russia’s transition to a market economy.

*Generation ‘P’*’s seeming obsession with consumerism and foreign influence is an artistic reaction to the chaotic conditions of the 1990s. By overwhelming the reader with slogans for Western name brands,<sup>98</sup> symbols of ancient Eastern spiritualism, and absurdist models for understanding contemporary reality, Pelevin simulates Russia’s turbulent transition to a capitalist, democratic system. That is, in the same way that the Russian people struggled to come to terms with foreign ideas, ideologies, and products in the aftermath of Soviet collapse, Vavilen strives to find meaning in his new environment but is constantly hindered by its instability. His

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<sup>97</sup> Vavilen’s summoning of the spirit is partially inspired by his recent purchase of a T-shirt advertising for the modern American punk-rock band “Rage Against the Machine” with an image of Che Guevara.

<sup>98</sup> “Parliament” (a brand of cigarettes) is mentioned over twenty times in the novel. Mercedes, BMW, Jeep, Coca-Cola, Sprite, Pepsi, McDonalds, and a half-dozen other name brands appear frequently. In the final chapter, entitled “Tuborg Man,” Vavilen’s 3-D double appears in a Tuborg beer commercial.

psychotropic and pseudo-religious experiences bring him closer to grasping the post-socialist system but, because they are, in essence, hallucinations, the lessons he learns from them are (for lack of a better term) false. In this way, Pelevin also satirizes the formation of abstract theories on “Russianness” in the post-Soviet space: without a reliable ideological foundation, all attempts to create a new narrative of Russian identity are moot.

It is interesting to note that, like in Bondarchuk’s *Obitaemyi ostrov* series, the mass media in Pelevin’s work is portrayed as a crucial tool of oppression in post-Soviet society. However, unlike the former, the latter depicts this system not as a weapon of a tyrannical political regime, but rather as an abstract, universal phenomenon. The political arena is swallowed up into Oranus just as individuals are, and it is subject to the same “sphincteral impulses” that govern the existence of Homo Zapiens. Thus, the TV politicians and celebrities in *Generation ‘P’* are described as 3-dimensional virtual doubles of their respective selves. Boris Yeltsin, Boris Berezovskii, Vavilen, and members of the Russian Army and State Duma are “rendered” onto the screen and controlled by a panel of shadowy executives. These executives, in turn, are subservient to the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, whose primary interest is expanding her cult by turning more and more people into Homo Zapiens. The media, with its advertisements and false realities, is the hand that gathers up wheat into the goddess’ basket.

The worldview developed in *Generation ‘P’* is fragmented, abstract, and highly critical of contemporary circumstances. Notably, however, it is also forward-thinking and ideologically flexible. Even as the hero’s environment becomes more and more complicated and confusing, he is consistently able to find meaning in new levels of reality. Like a grasshopper on the window of

a train, he is violently driven forward by forces he can't understand into a world he does not know, yet he struggles valiantly to find a foothold in his chaotic environment.

*Generation 'P'* offers a new approach to conceptualizing sociocultural circumstances in 1990s Russian society. Through a carefully constructed fantastic parallel world, the author outlines a grotesque, yet convincing, model for understanding consumerism as a central facet of post-Soviet life. With a dynamic, fast-paced narrative fragmented by inconsistencies between reality and fantasy, fact and fiction, he emulates the chaotic nature of modern Russian society: putting the reader in an analogous position to those who witnessed post-Soviet transformation. Furthermore, by focusing on the negative consequences of Russia's entrance into the global market, he underscores the fragility of ideological beliefs in an environment overwhelmed by outside influence.

In the context of Nikolai Berdiaev's theories on Russian national identity, in which the servile, feminine Russian is beholden to the domineering, masculine Westerner, *Generation 'P'* illustrates a perspective that views the relationship as significantly strained in the post-Soviet environment. As if raped by Western culture (through advertising, products, ideas, and ideologies), Russia is left traumatized and vengeful against the outside world.<sup>99</sup> This society deals with its shattered worldview by experimenting with various intellectual or ideological approaches (notably, spiritualism, psychotropic experimentation, nationalism, and consumerism), but it is still left reeling from the loss of its formerly identifying label. Vavilen's focus on finding

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<sup>99</sup> The theme of the Western rape of Russia is developed in greater detail in Pelevin's *Sviashchennaia kniga oborotnia* (2004). In *Generation 'P'*, it is hinted at in passing by one of Vavilen's colleagues.

a way to describe the post-Soviet “Russian Idea” – in order to crassly monetize it for advertising purposes – highlights the importance of this pursuit in the context of 1990s Russian cultural history.

The fantastic elements of Pelevin’s novel situate it firmly within the *fantastika* tradition. However, it is difficult to definitively place the work within a subgenre. The mythological, spiritual, and pseudo-religious aspects of the narrative suggest that it should be considered a work of fantasy (like Lukianenko’s *Nochnoi dozor*), whereas the focus on technology, mind control, and parallel virtual worlds indicate that it falls into the category of science fiction (like the Strugatskiis’ *Obitaemyi ostrov*). Vavilen’s interactions with Ishtar and her cult are inspired by fantastic mythology, but his relationship to his 3-Dimensional virtual double is seemingly purely rational.<sup>100</sup> The hero’s hallucinations, moreover, which are induced by both real chemical substances (i.e. narcotics) and pseudo-spiritual experiences (e.g. a ouija board), are neither rational nor fully fantastic. This, I believe, is indicative of one of Pelevin’s greatest strengths. In the same way that he and other postmodernist authors obfuscate the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, Pelevin regularly writes in such a way as to defy the conventions of established genres – forcing (or rather, allowing) readers to approach the work from a broader range of perspectives. In *Generation ‘P,’* this aspect of the author’s style illustrates how fantasy and science fiction are virtually identical in their ability to allegorize contemporary society. In

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<sup>100</sup> The 3-D rendering process is explained in relatively dense technical detail in *Generation ‘P.’* Like in Aleksei Tolstoi’s *Aelita* and Grigorii Adamov’s *Taina dvukh okeanov*, detailed descriptions of scientific inventions function as a means to imbue the plot with greater realism.

the context of the current study, this could be considered a crucial justification for my treatment of fantasy and science fiction as part of one and the same genre (i.e. *fantastika*).

### Viktor Ginzburg's *Generation P*

Viktor Ginzburg's *Generation P* is a rare example of postmodernist Russian cinema. Premiering to Russian audiences in 2011, it was an instant success, earning “larger box office receipts (\$4.3 million) from domestic theaters than any other Russian film” in the summer of that year (Anemone 2011). Notably, however, it is the only Russian *fantastika* blockbuster made in the Putin era without financial support from either *Fond Kino* or the state television industry. Generating public interest primarily through online marketing campaigns and a forum-centered fan base, Ginzburg managed to essentially crowd-source over seven million dollars for his project.<sup>101</sup> What one might label an underground, “unofficial” film of the twenty-first century, *Generation P* approaches contemporary reality with the biting cynicism of Pelevin's novel but does so in a way that offers a form of cultural catharsis: a reckoning with the chaos of the 1990s and its influence on the present day.

Before beginning my analysis of the narrative, allow me to further illustrate what I mean by labeling *Generation P* an “unofficial” film. First of all, Viktor Ginzburg was an outsider to the Russian film industry. Born in Moscow but raised and educated in New York, the young director returned to Russia in 2006 with the rights to adapt Pelevin's novel but few professional

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<sup>101</sup> Although Ginzburg has given over two dozen interviews in Russian and English, he has been relatively elusive concerning *Generation P*'s financing. In a 2011 interview with the BBC, Ginzburg vaguely indicated that there were various sources that he combined over the course of five years to achieve the total budget (Ginzburg 2011d). From 2008 to 2011, there were systems set up to make donations to the project on Russian social media sites *vkontakte* and *odnoklassniki*, and Facebook and Yandex made sizeable contributions to obtain rights to cross-promote with the film on their platforms (Ginzburg 2012). In another interview with *RIA Novosti*, the director conceded that some support also came from the companies whose logos appear in the film, but emphasized that their contributions were minor (Ginzburg 2011c). Notably, Ginzburg's second film – an adaptation of Pelevin's *Ampir V* – has generated funding through a cryptocurrency ICO (Initial Coin Offering). It is the first blockbuster project in history to do so successfully (Bablos 2018).

contacts. When asked in an interview how he was accepted by the Russian film industry,

Ginzburg responded:

The Russian film industry rejected me immediately. When I came to this country with this film project, the film industry told me: "You're not f\*cking needed here! It's impossible to film. No one will understand. It is difficult, not relevant." It gave me no support, only resistance. This film was not funded by the film industry. Thus, it really is a partisan approach to filmmaking: outside the industry (Ginzburg 2011b).

Turned away by every studio to which he pitched the idea for his film, the director sought funding from the Russian television industry but found little support and a constrictive artistic environment:

The shooting period was heavily delayed for many reasons, mainly financial. *Generation P* is a truly independent film, it was not financed by the state or television. Although one of the leading TV channels wanted to join the project, I immediately realized that it would be a completely different film, in which casting, script, and format would have to be approved, and I had to refuse their participation (Ginzburg 2011d).

Ginzburg's stated reason for refusing the help of a major TV network underscores his connection with the unofficial cinematic culture of the Soviet period. Like Andrei Tarkovskii and other *auteur* directors, he insisted on maintaining artistic integrity and developing his own unique vision. When faced with the alternative of partnering with an entity that might censor his work or struggling to find outside sources of funding, he chose the latter despite the fact that it was guaranteed to cause him considerable hardship.<sup>102</sup>

Considered in the context of a theoretical post-Soviet official/unofficial sociocultural paradigm, Ginzburg's approach to addressing contemporary issues can best be described as

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<sup>102</sup> Film and literary scholar Anthony Anemone points to Ginzburg's inability (or refusal) to work with the Russian film and television industries as the reason it took five years for the film to reach theaters (Anemone 2011).



“anti-establishment.” Outlining his motivations for creating *Generation P* and its place in twenty-first-century Russian cinema, Ginzburg claims:

What does Pelevin do? He does not simply reveal the essence of man in today's Russia. He peels off the skin. He's a tough writer who is able to dig very deeply into Russian psychosis, into Russian reality. And it is sometimes very unpleasant and difficult. I think that I tried to transfer this to the screen and make it accessible to a wide audience. And it hit the critics. The hatred I saw in the reviews struck me. It's a defensive reaction: we're not like that, Pelevin's not like that, it's not all like that. They do not want the audience to watch such a movie. Non-genre, postmodernist cinema, which does not fit into any of their conceptions but at the same time comes out in mass circulation in the cinemas. Because the broader audience is a fool, he will misunderstand it all. From here it is not far to revolution (Ginzburg 2011b).

Insomuch as Pelevin's novel is a surrealistic attack on post-Soviet existence, it was Ginzburg's *intention* to subject audiences to a tough (but meaningful) intellectual experience. Thus, while some critics condemned the film in much the same way (and, correspondingly, with much of the same terminology) that Soviet critics had castigated Tarkovskii's *Stalker* and *Solaris*, others recognized in it the qualities that granted it mass appeal among the Russian public.

The film was a success because it is very lively, is watched "in one breath," and talks about serious things lightly and cheerfully. This is an undoubted success – to be able to portray a rather nasty life, a kind of "dystopia," and do it with humor, with fun attractions for the viewer, with a display of all sorts of luxury and beauty. Without any tediousness, without the slightest attempts to squeeze out a tear, without pretensions to tragedy even where it probably exists. Without moralizing – or with a kind of moralizing that does not strain. The film drinks like a carbonated cocktail mixed with something intoxicating and dangerous (Smirnov 2011).

Ginzburg's deft balance of intellectual density and light-hearted playfulness offered a form of release for a broad cultural anxiety concerning the 1990s. *Generation P* takes Pelevin's dystopian world and presents it in a way that is entertaining and aesthetically pleasing: in a sense soothing historical anxieties with humor, irony, and nostalgia. Thus, while it is evident that the

film was neither desired nor appreciated by established voices in the domestic cinema industry, sales figures make it equally clear that it had broad appeal among the Russian people. In the same way that Tarkovskii's *fantastika* film adaptations were subject to severe criticism in the face of notable popular success, Ginzburg's *Generation P* was deplored by mainstream culture but embraced by a sizeable portion of the population.

*Generation P* follows the plot and language of Pelevin's work quite closely (Anemone 2011). The hero's psychedelic and pseudo-spiritual experiences are portrayed with vivid imagery and impressive CGI, and virtually all of the philosophical and ideological concepts developed in the original are present in the adaptation. However, the crucial difference between Pelevin's novel and Ginzburg's film lies in their respective tones. In contrast to the former, which is sharp and merciless in its criticism of contemporary society, the latter employs a lighter and considerably less cynical approach. Ginzburg takes some of the novel's most vulgar, pathetic, and disturbing aspects and depicts them with a certain irony, encouraging the viewer to find humor in the inanity of it all. In this way, he adapts a biting satire of 1990s Russian culture for a generation no longer living under the same desperate conditions. Offering a form of catharsis for those who suffered through the period and a (false) nostalgia for those too young to understand it, Ginzburg portrays the period as chaotic but cool, dangerous but free, confusing but fun. Here are a couple of examples to illustrate my point.

Just as in Pelevin's novel, Ginzburg presents a theory of post-Soviet consumerism defined by wow-impulses and their respective oral, anal, and displacing functions. However, while Pelevin details this "Oranus theory" in the form of a long and dense intellectual treatise,

Ginzburg presents it as a sort of hallucinated commercial. Rapid-fire images of logos, symbols, and pop-cultural icons combined with superimposed text and a narrative voice-over create the impression of a simulated virtual experience – in a sense illustrating the wow-displacing impulse by compelling the viewer to marvel at what is on the screen. However, because the audience is aware of the expected reaction to this wild display (it is explained in the commercial itself), they are in a sense “in on the joke.” Taking a bit of the edge off of Pelevin’s criticism of 1990s consumerist culture, Ginzburg orients his audience toward a model for post-Soviet society that is as absurdly comical as it is cutting. This impression is strengthened by the irreverence with which the characters treat the Oranus theory: while Vavilen and his colleagues cynically abuse it to manipulate clients and make money, they also regularly joke about or poke fun at (what they see as) ironic manifestations of the oral and anal wow impulses in everyday life.

In another episode, Vavilen – tripping on LSD – attempts to conjure the spirit of Che Guevara with a ouija board but accidentally summons a monstrous talking serpent instead. Terrified by this apparition, he experiences what can best be described as a hallucinogen-induced psychotic breakdown. Falling to the floor in anguish and emotionally begging God for forgiveness for past indiscretions, Vavilen appears to have a profound spiritual experience. He denounces his profession, consumerist lifestyle, and drug abuse, and promises to atone by creating a new commercial for God. However, just as quickly as it is established, the pathos of the scene is instantly shattered: jumping up, Vavilen grabs his dictaphone and joyfully records a new script idea. The irony of the hero’s pseudo-religious experience is underscored when, looking at the finished product, he merrily exclaims “Do you like it God!?!” (Ginzburg 2011a)

If the scenes I have described indicate only minor departures from Pelevin's text (both, in fact, cite a significant portion verbatim), the impression that the film creates as a whole provides a rather stark contrast. While Ginzburg depicts post-Soviet society as the same fragmented, chaotic, and dangerous world envisioned in Pelevin's novel, he does so in a way that also subtly glorifies it. The catchy slogans, impressive soundtrack, flashy CGI, and overall atmosphere of "cool" developed in the film paint the 1990s as a period defined by freedom, originality, and counterculture – in addition to chaos, violence, and uncertainty. Distancing himself from the subject matter, Ginzburg highlights positive and negative aspects of the post-Soviet experience and applies humor and irony to both. In this way, he illustrates a new way of looking at the period and offers a form of catharsis for those who experienced it: in a sense encouraging viewers to laugh at their former circumstances (and selves). The protagonist's pager, awkward mullet, and outdated flip phone remind the audience that this strange period of sociocultural history is now in the past.

Ginzburg adapted Pelevin's ideas to both a new medium and new economic and sociocultural reality. Capitalizing on counterculture and feelings of nostalgia, he presented a critical but light-hearted approach to conceptualizing the 1990s: offering a reevaluation of the period's defining features and a release from historical anxieties. His narrative introduces highly cynical models for understanding contemporary reality, but undermines their solemnity with humor and irony. Moreover, despite the fact that his project was originally treated as a nonstarter by the domestic film industry, it ultimately managed to both exceed financial expectations and develop a notable cult following. With a guerilla-marketing advertising strategy and little to no

influence from the state, Ginzburg created (what is thus far) the only successful adaptation of a postmodernist *fantastika* satire on post-Soviet Russian culture.

### Aleksei German's *Trudno byt' bogom*

Aleksei German is one of the most interesting figures in the history of Soviet and Russian cinema. Born in 1938 during Stalin's Great Terror, he was educated into Thaw-era liberalism but directed his first film on the cusp of the stifling Stagnation period. Premiering in 1967, *Sed'moi sputnik* (co-directed by Grigorii Aranov) features a dark and unnerving commentary on the history of Soviet purges through a depiction of one man's experiences during the post-Revolutionary Red Terror. In it the directors criticize the brutality and backwardness of state terror and underline connections to the constrictive conditions of the present day: challenging the contemporary regime's reliance on cultural oppression as a means of maintaining ideological authority. However, while *Sed'moi sputnik* surprisingly escaped relatively unscathed by critics, German's first solo project – *Proverka na dorogakh* (1971) – caused “an uproar of censorship [that made it] one of the most notorious cases of shelving in the Brezhnev era” (Graham 2012, 180).<sup>103</sup> Removed from circulation and effectively banned for over fifteen years, *Proverka na dorogakh* was among the most notable casualties of the Brezhnev regime's crackdown on liberalism in the arts. Consequently, like Andrei Tarkovskii, German became associated with the “dissident” label on account of the (perceived) controversial themes and ideas presented in his works.

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<sup>103</sup> The film's positive portrayal of a deserter during World War II was a central cause for its removal from circulation.

In “Back to the Future in Arkanar: The Strugatskiis, Aleksei German Sr and the Problem of Injustice in *Hard to Be a God*,” literary scholar Muireann Maguire describes German in the following way:

The ‘maverick director’ Aleksei German Sr, considered by many to be Tarkovsky’s artistic equal, nevertheless remains little-known outside Russia. Like his contemporary and rival Nikita Mikhalkov, most of his films interrogate both the memory and the reality of Russia’s Stalinist past, including the atrocities of the secret police and the Gulags. Unlike Mikhalkov’s plot-oriented films, however, German’s dreamlike diegesis and incidental, often apparently chaotic, action tend to challenge or alienate viewers, especially Western audiences. His most acclaimed films to date, *Khrustalev, mashinu!* (*Khrustalev, My Car!*; Russia 1998) and *Moi drug Ivan Lapshin* (*My Friend Ivan Lapshin*; USSR 1986), have received negative or minimal Western publicity. Much of this neglect was caused by the long-term ‘shelving’ – de facto banning – within Russia of four of German’s six films; although he was never an explicit dissident, his themes and subtexts sat uncomfortably with the Soviet regime. *Trudno byt’ bogom* (Russia 2013), posthumously released, was intended by German to be his final film and the consummation of his life’s work (Maguire 2015, 234).

An *auteur* director whose works were banned or treated with disdain by Stagnation-era critics, German was a dissident by association with the liberal current in Soviet cinema (Khagi 2015, 210). The humanistic and anti-authoritarian messages that characterize his oeuvre are readily comparable to those in Tarkovskii’s films, as are many of the stylistic peculiarities and philosophical explorations for which he is known. Notably, moreover, while Tarkovskii complained that he was only allowed to create five films in twenty years (Tarkovsky 2006, 157), German succeeded in directing only six films in nearly fifty years. His *Trudno byt’ bogom*, developed as a project in 1967 but only finished and posthumously released in 2013 (Zvonkine 2015, 158), is a useful window into the evolution of *auteur* cinema and “unofficial” identity from the Stagnation period to the Putin era.

*Trudno byt' bogom* is based in part on a screenplay drafted by the Strugatskii brothers with Aleksei German in 1968. In his *Kommentarii k proidennomu*, Boris Strugatskii describes the history of their first screenplay in a way that offers a revealing perspective on the state of Soviet censorship in the 1960s:

For a good thirty years ABS wrote a large number of screenplays and screenplay variants. Some of the surviving examples seem to me (and seemed to both of us at the time) – unsuccessful. . . . Some are irretrievably lost, like our first, written based on the novel *Strana bagrovykh tuch* in the early sixties, or the screenplay for *Boitsovyi kot vozvrashchaetsia v preispodniuiu*, which we made for the Odessa Film Studio – It was hacked to death by Goskino under the standard charge of “export of revolution.” Concerning both of the above screenplays, nevertheless, it was no big loss. But for the initial version of the screenplay on *Trudno byt' bogom* – it was a pity. It had its own fate, with specific intricacies and unexpected twists of history. It was started a few times and thrown out; there were moments when, it seemed, it was almost in the bag: just a little more, a bit more, and they will start to shoot the film. . . . but every time there arose some sort of obstacle (sometimes of a historical scale, like the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968) and all hope collapsed, and again all was postponed until the day that hell would freeze over. For a good two years the screenplay dragged itself through all of Lenfilm’s departments (from the *redsovet* to the *khudsovet*), not skipping a single one. Many people took part in its discussion: not only editors and film critics, but also well-known literati. . . . As a result of these editorial peripeteia, all copies of the script without exception, which were written with Aleksei German and specifically for Aleksei German, were lost forever (Strugatskii 2003, 241).

Highlighting the conditions faced by dissident writers and directors during the Stagnation period, Boris Strugatskii points to an inflexible and ineffectual censorship apparatus as the principal impediment to their work. He expresses sadness at the fate of the brothers’ project with German, later stating with regret that “the time of the most interesting (Aleksei German) and most productive (with Andrei Tarkovskii) work has passed, it seems to me, forever” (Strugatskii 2003,



250). However, while neither of the brothers lived to see the premier of *Trudno byt' bogom*,<sup>104</sup>

their influence was central to its perception among Russian audiences. According to Maguire,

Aleksei Yurevich German's film adaptation of Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii's 1964 *Trudno byt' bogom* . . . has been critically acclaimed as the most intellectually and culturally significant, and certainly the longest-awaited, of any screen version of the brothers' fiction. The 2013 film . . . rivals Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (USSR 1979) and Konstantin Lopushanskii's dystopian cinema as the most philosophical screen adaptation of the Strugatskii's fiction to date. This reputation (established decades prior to its release) derives from both the original novel's role as political allegory, and German's status as possibly the most insightful, if enigmatic, auteur filmmaker of his generation (Maguire 2015, 233).

A famous dissident novel adapted into film by a famous dissident director, *Trudno byt' bogom* was destined for broad appeal in "unofficial" counterculture long before it was completed.

However, although filming began in 1999, issues with funding and the director's health caused considerable delays. "Shot over seven years and in post-production for another seven years,"

German's film premiered to Russian audiences only in February of 2014 (Zvonkine 2015, 158).<sup>105</sup>

As I mentioned in my analysis of the Strugatskii's novel, the plot of German's *Trudno byt' bogom* is remarkably similar to that of its literary source. Like Peter Fleischmann, German took few liberties with the brothers' narrative, leaving the plot structure, timeline, and primary conflict virtually unaltered in his adaptation. Notably, however, *Trudno byt' bogom* immerses the

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<sup>104</sup> In a 2010 interview with *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, Boris Strugatskii claimed that he was not consulted on the final screenplay, but said "I already know that the film will be wonderful and even epoch-making" (Strugatskii 2010).

<sup>105</sup> *Trudno byt' bogom* first premiered (out of competition) at the Rome Film Festival on November 13, 2013 (Zvonkine 2015, 158). Because it is not uncommon for artistic films to be released at festivals before premiering to domestic audiences, it is not necessarily surprising that it took four months to reach Russian theaters. On the other hand, the hype built around the film based on Ginzburg's reputation created a considerable level of demand for it on the domestic market.

viewer in what can be best described as the “putrid stink and filth” of his fictional dystopian world. In “The Artistic Process of Aleksei German,” film scholar Eugenie Zvonkine writes:

The director . . . stated that this ‘world that never existed’ had to bear a strong resemblance to western medieval culture and lifestyle: ‘From the moment go I said: let’s try to make a film that would smell; film the medieval era through a keyhole, as if we had lived there ourselves’ (Dolin 2013, 274). The effect on the spectators seemed to be in line with this project, since critics around the world spoke about the physical impressions produced by the film, which almost created the sensation of smelling faeces and blood, and of sensing the overwhelming mud (Zvonkine 2015, 159).

The overall feeling of filthiness, produced through careful camera work and impeccably designed sets, forces the viewer to experience the nastiness and baseness of historical human existence. The opening scenes depict an open-ended outhouse from which a man excretes faeces while being prodded in the buttocks by a spear. A couple of men smear dung on their faces while laughing merrily, covered in mud and dressed in rags. Torrential rain pours down through most of the film, leaving everything and everyone damp and putrid. The feeling of contamination is palpable, and it effectively overwhelms the primary narrative. Creating an impression of desperate feudal existence predominantly through images and impressions, German minimizes instances of dialogue and straightforward narration. Notably, just as Peter Fleischmann employed ultraviolence in his adaptation to shock viewers’ consciences,<sup>106</sup> German uses an overwhelming aura of dirtiness to elicit empathy for his protagonists. These poor creatures, living in a world of destitution and misery, are not even aware of their plight: “Filth, mud, blood, guts and scatological babble are ubiquitous in almost every scene; worse still, the characters

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<sup>106</sup> See my analysis of Peter Fleischmann’s *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein*.

(many authentically shabby and starved-looking, others crazed) appear to have internalized the foulness of their surroundings” (Maguire 2015, 245).

Although hidden beneath a thick layer of stylization, *Trudno byt' bogom* creates an allegory for Russian civilization that is as applicable to the Putin era as it is to the Stalin era.

Unlike the Strugatskiis, who packaged their novel as deceptively conventional sf, German made no secret of his intention to reflect present-day Russia in his portrayal of Arkanar. While he rejected any suggestion that Don Reba might represent Vladimir Putin (responding that Putin, tasked with guiding Russia’s historical development, might be more usefully compared to Anton himself), he unequivocally viewed the coming of Arkanar’s two waves of repression – the Greys and the Blacks – as analogous to everyday bureaucratic and political oppression in Russia. He explicitly states, in a 2008 interview with Anton Dolin, that conditions in Russia have not substantially or consistently improved between the late Stalinist period (vividly conjured in his earlier films) and the present day (German 2006, 272). . . . Similarly, the chronotope of German’s cinema does not admit of past or future: it is always in the present (Maguire 2015, 247).

Criticizing modern reality with a level of freedom only recently claimed by artists in the post-Soviet period, German makes a controversial commentary on contemporary sociopolitical circumstances. He employs themes and devices characteristic of *chernukha* cinema (most notably, its aura of utter hopelessness), capitalizes on methods learned from decades working as a Stagnation-era *auteur* (e.g. his play with the fourth wall and manipulation of black-and-white film), and even evokes Iakov Protazanov’s *Aelita* (Maguire 2015, 250). However, the most recognizable aspect of German’s talent is his ability to engage with historical dialogue on Russian culture from a broad and mature perspective.

German seems to be engaging in a dialogue with the artistic heritage of previous centuries, while at the same time celebrating and undermining it. It is a recurrent position for the filmmaker, who used to say that he made *Trial on the Road* as a political challenge, to invite the state to ‘take pity on the Russian man’; *Twenty Days*

*without War* as a challenge to Iurii Ozerov's *Liberation* and to the 'dishonest cinema' in general; and *Hard to Be a God* as a challenge to 'the contemporary cinema that needs so many words' (Dolin 2013, 278). It seems plausible that entertaining such an artistic dialogue with other artistic works in his films was a necessary condition for German's creativity, and it might explain why he never made a film set in the contemporary world (Zvonkine 2015, 176).

In many ways, therefore, the defining features of German's oeuvre were a reaction to other trends and ideas he witnessed during a long career in Soviet cinema. He created a dialogue with a large variety of works, encouraging others to do the same by offering counterarguments to their principal ideas and messages. Thus, while *Trudno byt' bogom* may aptly be considered German's challenge to contemporary mainstream cinema, it is also informed by (and a reaction to) decades of dialogue on Russian film.

In the context of twenty-first-century history, *Trudno byt' bogom* is an anomalous example of Russian cinema. It is at once grounded in the past and sharply focused on issues of consequence to the present. Engaging in a dialogue with roots in the 1950s, it expresses a perspective that links the oppression of feudalism, Stalinism, and fascism to modern sociopolitical circumstances – providing criticism of a (perceived) regression to oppressive methods of state control in the Putin era. Moreover, while *Trudno byt' bogom* may be considered a challenge to certain trends in the modern Russian film industry, it is also a demonstration of the value of *auteur* cinema in the post-Soviet space. Reaffirming the individualistic and anti-authoritarian messages expressed in dissident cinema from the early 1960s through the mid-2000s, German contributes to a long-standing dialogue on the relationship between the state and the people in Russian civilization.

### Marina and Sergei Diachenko's *Ritual*

Marina and Sergei Diachenko are among the most prolific fantasy writers in Eastern Europe.<sup>107</sup> Beginning in 1994 with their award-winning novel *Privratnik*, the Ukrainian couple quickly established themselves as prominent figures in post-Soviet *fantastika*. Along with a considerable number of novellas and short stories, they published ten novels before the turn of the century, virtually all of which received either a Russian, Ukrainian, or international award.<sup>108</sup> Their works have been translated into English, German, French, Chinese, and most of the national languages of the CIS states. In 2005, they were named “Best Author” by the European Science Fiction Society at Eurocon (European Science Fiction Society 2019), and went on to become popular screenwriters in the Russian film industry in Moscow. They composed the screenplay for Bondarchuk’s highly-successful *Obitaemyi ostrov* series (2008-2009) and, while continuing to publish best-selling literature at an impressive rate, also wrote screenplays for *Temnyi mir: ravnovesie*: a 12-part *fantastika* television series and feature film that premiered in 2013-2014. In 2015, a film adaptation of their novel *Ritual*, directed by Timur Bekmambetov’s protégé Indar Dzhendubaev and written by the Diachenkos themselves, propelled the authors to even greater fame. A second film adaptation of their work – *On drakon 2* – which is cosponsored by the Russian and Chinese film industries, is scheduled for release in late 2019 or early 2020.

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<sup>107</sup> The couple currently reside in Los Angeles, California. Although they no longer live in Eastern Europe, they are still active in the Russian and Ukrainian literature and film industries.

<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, *Ritual* (1996), which is commonly regarded as one of the couple’s finest works on blogs, forums, and in social-media communities, received no notable prizes or awards.

Marina and Sergei Diachenko filled a critical niche in post-Soviet literature. Capitalizing on the influx of international fantasy and fantasy culture in the early 1990s, they adopted Western styles and themes but adapted them for an Eastern European audience. They wrote almost exclusively in the (sub)genre of fantasy, and influences from Western icons (most notably C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien) are readily apparent in their works. They targeted their writing at a young audience, conforming to the conventions of contemporary Western youth literature in a way that the Strugatskiis, Pelevin, and Lukianenko never did (and likely never sought to do). Furthermore, they centered their narratives around complex female protagonists: appealing to a rising generation of post-Soviet women by portraying relatable characters as intelligent and independent heroes. By engaging with (and uniting the interests of) a variety of niche or underrepresented groups (e.g. fantasy enthusiasts, women, young people), the Diachenkos established themselves as a name brand in post-Soviet *fantastika*.

*Ritual*, the couple's second novel, was first released by Ukrainian publishing house KRANG in 1996 and republished in Russian by AST in 2000. It centers around a young woman – Princess Iuta – who is kidnapped from the Kingdom of Northern Conta by a dragon. As part of a paganistic ritual, the kingdom habitually sacrifices a girl to the dragon, who in turn must consume her to complete the rite. However, after being taken to a deserted island, Iuta realizes that her dragon captor is actually a young man. Arm-ann, as he is called, struggles with the decision to eat Iuta because he despises his ancestors' brutal tradition. Moreover, while the couple initially treat each other with disdain and enmity, they eventually form a close romantic bond. Iuta helps Arm-ann to become more like a man and translates hieroglyphics on the island

that he can not read, and Arm-ann saves Iuta from a number of precarious situations and watches over her while she sleeps. Eventually, however, Arm-ann comes to realize that Iuta can no longer survive on his island. He summons a dragon slayer, a prince from Iuta's kingdom, to stage a fake fight and take her back home. After doing so, he learns that the prince is corrupt and has willingly offered Iuta to be consumed by a sea monster. Despite a prophecy that warns of the dragon's death in a battle with the sea monster, Arm-ann valiantly fights and defeats it to free Iuta. The story ends on an ambiguous note: as Iuta looks lovingly into the eyes of Arm-ann, readers are forced to guess whether the wounds he suffered were fatal or if their love will be renewed.

*Ritual* is romantic and full of pathos. The love story *à la Beauty and the Beast* leaves readers feeling sorry for the couple's fate and hopeful for their future. The heroine's experiences have a powerful effect on her emotions and beliefs, and an attachment to both humanity and Arm-ann leave her torn between two worlds. Iuta is portrayed as deep, intelligent, and brave, and, although she fulfills the role of damsel in distress, her actions are also critical to the development of the plot. In the Diachenkos' narrative, Iuta is empathetic and highly relatable, but also heroic: a model for young women in the twenty-first century.

In comparison to *Nochnoi dozor* or *Generation 'P,'* there is nothing particularly stylistically interesting about *Ritual*. The narration is simple and linear (a common feature of Western young adult literature), and there is little to say about the allegorization of contemporary society in the work. There are no themes laid out that are uncommon to either Western or Russian literature, and there is virtually no interest paid to deeper philosophical or ideological

ideas. Rather, it is a straightforward love story set in a fantasy universe. Like Andrei Beliaev's *Chelovek-amfibiia*, its interest is in entertaining the reader, creating an atmosphere of wonder, providing an escape from reality, and engaging with feelings of lost love.

As a window into Russian and Ukrainian society in the mid-1990s, the most notable aspect of *Ritual* is its focus on a relatable female role model. Iuta is depicted with significant agency, and the story – told from her perspective – encourages readers to empathize with her on a deep emotional level. Particularly in contrast to most of the examples of Soviet *fantastika* discussed in this dissertation, which tended to relegate female characters to minor parts or exclude them completely, women play a dominating role in the Diachenkos' text. In this way, the authors challenged contemporary gender norms while simultaneously embracing traditional romantic notions of partnership and love. Offering a new model for conceptualizing female agency in the post-Soviet space, the Diachenkos show that a woman can be vulnerable but powerful, guarded but caring, emotional but understanding – a lover and a fighter.



### Indar Dzhendubaev's *On Drakon*

Indar Dzhendubaev's *On drakon* is a high budget blockbuster film adaptation of Marina and Sergei Diachenko's 1996 novel *Ritual*. Premiering to Russian audiences in 2015, it was Dzhendubaev's directorial debut and one of the last Russian-language films produced by Timur Bekmambetov's Bazelevs film studios.<sup>109</sup> Featuring stunning CGI (over 85% of the scenes are computer generated) and outstanding performances from its young cast, it created a significant impression on the international market. However, while the film performed well abroad (notably, in China and America), it was a major failure domestically: earning back less than \$2 million of its \$18 million dollar budget at the box-office (Kinopoisk 2019d). Its failure at home, as I will show, is on account of some of the same traits that lent it broad appeal in international cinema.

Like Marina and Sergei Diachenko's *Ritual*, *On drakon* focuses on a heroic female lead and her relationship with her captor-turned-lover who is also a dragon. A sizeable portion of the narrative is identical to that of *Ritual* (the screenplay, after all, was written by the same authors), but the film's innovations seem to significantly blunt the impressions made by the original. Most notably, Dzhendubaev's film strips the Diachenkos' story of much of its emotional weight by subtly changing the narrative to fit more closely with contemporary Western (i.e. Hollywood) cinematic models. Allow me to provide a few examples to illustrate this point.

In contrast to Iuta from the Diachenkos' novel, who is described as plain and unattractive in comparison to her sisters, the Princess Miroslava (Mira) of *On drakon* is a stunning beauty (played by Russian actress Mariia Poezhaeva). Her role as captive in the beginning of the film,

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<sup>109</sup> The studio pivoted to a predominantly English-speaking audience in the second half of the 2010s.

consequently, loses a significant amount of its complexity. Arman, played by male model and actor Matvei Lykov, is instantly attracted to her – seemingly falling in love almost immediately. There is little to no time devoted to the development of their emotional connection before the physical aspect of their relationship comes to dominate the narrative. They touch during their first conversation. Slow-motion scenes of wet, writhing bodies and close-ups on young chiseled faces compel the audience to view their relationship as something passionate and tangible. However, while this aspect of the film is certainly appealing, it significantly detracts from the meaningfulness of the young couple's bond. By smoothing over a number of complexities in the early stages of their relationship, Dzhendubaev undermines a significant aspect of the story in favor of making it simpler and, consequently, more relatable to a broad audience.

Another major difference between *Ritual* and *On drakon* can be seen in the relationship between Arman and the dragonslayer prince. Rather than returning to save Mira from an indifferent husband's plan to sacrifice his wife to a sea monster, Arman shows up just in time to wreck their wedding ceremony. Mira, who was entering into the union at the insistence of her father and against her will, is whisked away by Arman after a rather one-sided battle between him and the arrogant prince. In a sense muscling aside his competitor, Arman rescues Mira in a way that emphasizes his dominant masculinity. However, while this frames the male lead as a heroic role model, it also significantly detracts from the impression created in the Diachenkos' text of the heroine's independence and agency. Taking one of *Ritual*'s greatest strengths and folding it to fit into a Hollywood frame (*a la* Tarzan and Jane), Dzhendubaev significantly blunts the Diachenkos' commentary on the role of women in contemporary society.

Certainly the strangest transformation from novel to film can be seen in the addition of an unnamed CGI character, a raccoon-like creature that serves as Arman's closest (and only) friend. It fulfills exactly the same role in *On drakon* as the famous Jar-Jar Binks from George Lucas' *Star Wars* series: a bumbling but cute buffoon inserted into the plot to appeal to young children. Similarly, like Jar Jar Binks, this character became a center of criticism for the film's detractors. In seemingly countless reviews, blogs, message boards, and social media pages, audiences have raged at what they consider a shameless deviation from the novel's plot affected specifically to capitalize off of a broader viewership. In a number of examples, critics have suggested that the character is symptomatic of a much larger shortcoming: the Americanization of the film stripped it of its relevance to Russian audiences.

Notably, the most significant difference between novel and adaptation is in their respective endings. While *Ritual* closes on an ambiguous note, leaving the reader to ponder the fate of the lovable couple, *On drakon* ends with a typical Hollywood happy ending. After defeating the dragonslayer in battle, Arman takes Mira back to his deserted Island and the two begin a new life together. They have a beautiful child, play together in the ocean, and are portrayed experiencing domestic bliss. The film ends as the couple fly off into the sky together, making out in front of a beautiful sunset over a glistening ocean. The impression left by this ending, quite obviously inspired by Western models, could not be farther from that elicited by the ending of the Diachenkos' novel. Again, Western cinematic tropes replace meaningful aspects of the story at the expense of the artistic integrity of the original.

*On drakon* was not a failure for Bazelevs studio. By making a significant amount of money abroad and creating an option for a second film with Chinese sponsorship, it may certainly be seen as at least a partial success for Russian cinema.<sup>110</sup> However, the impression that it made in the Russian sociocultural atmosphere of the mid 2010s was disappointing (at best) for its creators. The film's flashy style and melodramatic narrative did not resonate with domestic audiences the same way that Bekmambetov's *Nochnoi dozor* or Bondarchuk's *Obitaemyi ostrov* had in the 2000s. This, I believe, is for two principal reasons, both of which are crucial to an understanding of Russian cultural identity in the modern day.

First of all, many Russians are wearied by contemporary commercialist trends in Russian cinema. Particularly in juxtaposition with Hollywood blockbusters, which to this day are considered superior by the majority of Russian critics, domestic films that try to emulate Western styles often appear clumsy or unabashedly greedy to modern audiences. Notably, *Nochnoi dozor*, *Dnevnoi dozor*, *Obitaemyi ostrov*, *Obitaemyi ostrov: skhvatka*, and *Generation P* all suffered criticism for this exact fault. However, while the aforementioned films also boasted considerable ideological density, there is nothing of the kind to speak of in *On drakon*. Russian audiences (symbolically) rejected Dzhendubaev's film because it highlighted the vapidness of contemporary mass-produced art. It succeeded neither in addressing issues of importance to Russian audiences, nor in appealing to modern demands for cinema focused on Russian culture and identity.

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<sup>110</sup> According to an article by the Russian news agency *Interfax*, *On drakon* was among the top three strongest earners on the international market in 2016 – a year that witnessed a doubling in box-office sales for Russian films abroad (Interfax 2016).

This brings us to one of the most crucial points I make in this chapter. In the Putin era, Russian films are made specifically and intentionally for Russian audiences, and those that appear not to be are rarely successful. This is because the Russian film industry is constrained by a number of critical factors – most notably reliance on the state for funding – and does not yet have the technical capabilities to compete with Western products.<sup>111</sup> Thus, when a movie is made in Russia today, it must meet the needs of at least a small segment of national society. Lopushanskii's *Gadkie lebedi* and German's *Trudno byt' bogom* succeeded because they were enticing to the post-Soviet intelligentsia, despite the fact that that audience represents only a small fraction of the population.<sup>112</sup> Bondarchuk's *Nochnoi dozor* and Ginzburg's *Generation P* succeeded because they appealed to a portion of the youth with new ideas and “cool” counterculture, despite the fact that the demographic's spending power is significantly lower than that of adult audiences. On the other hand, *On drakon*, which did not appeal to any specific segment of society, and which was clearly designed for appeal among a broad international audience, was not widely appreciated in Russian society.

The second aspect of *On drakon* that led to its lackluster reception, which is directly connected to the first, is the absence of distinctive cultural markers in the film. Aside from some minor features (most notably, the alteration of the heroine's name from the Hebrew “Iuta” to the

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<sup>111</sup> In the words of my close friend Rodion Nikolaichuk, a freelance video editor in the Moscow film industry, “why should we make it, if Hollywood can make it better?”

<sup>112</sup> Here I am defining success in terms of the films' overall domestic receptions. What constitutes success in the Russian film industry is a highly debated topic. Technically, aside from Bekmambetov's *Dozor* series, every single post-Soviet film discussed in this dissertation was an overall financial loss for the studio that created it. Thus, it is beneficial to rely on other factors when considering a film's value in the post-Soviet sociocultural environment.

more Slavic-sounding Miroslava), there is no indication that Dzhendubaev's fictional society is in any way comparable to modern Russia. There is no space for a juxtaposition of "us" and "them," no room for a comparison of Imperial Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet civilizations, and no commentary on "Russianness" or Russia's place in global society. It is entertaining and emotionally engaging, but it is also shallow and ideologically stagnant. Critically, its features indicate that it could have been made anywhere and by anyone in the West. Thus, Russian audiences expressed their dissatisfaction with this (internationally) subpar and nationally irrelevant film by generally ignoring it. Moreover, many of those who did watch it, based on my analysis of prominent blogs, ratings, and reviews, viewed it as a failure at best and an affront at worst to Russian cinematic culture.

This brings us to one of the central arguments of this dissertation. What it means to be Russian has long been a vexing problem, and *fantastika* has historically served as a means to engage with the Russian idea on a conceptual and theoretical level. When a *fantastika* film retreats from this well-established tradition of national allegory, however, it is destined to fail. Successful works of Russian *fantastika* reflect some sort of dialogue with contemporary and historical circumstances specific to Russian (or Soviet) culture. In this way, they participate in an ongoing project to figure out what the Russian worldview can or should be, and work to (re)define the foundational characteristics of "Russianness" in their contemporary worlds. The poor domestic reception of Dzhendubaev's *On drakon*, in this sense, illustrates the pitfalls of creating a Russian film that does not relate explicitly to issues of national interest.

## Conclusion:

This dissertation illustrates the value of examining Russian *fantastika* film adaptations as windows into the Russian cultural mentality during various periods of Soviet and Russian history. Through my examination of over thirty works of *fantastika* literature and film, I have shown how this understudied genre is particularly apt for an analysis of the ways in which perceptions of Russian identity and conceptions of the Russian idea have transformed over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In my analysis, I have highlighted features of the debate on Russian national identity that have consistently played a role in dialogues on the subject in both the Soviet and post-Soviet environments. Moreover, I have shown how works of *fantastika* can help us to reconceptualize various periods of Russian history based on sociocultural production, rather than political leadership.

One of the principal arguments of this study is that certain paradigms of Russian identity imagined by Petr Chaadaev, Nikolai Berdiaev, Vladimir Bibler, and other Russian thinkers have consistently served as a foundation for dialogues on identity in the Soviet and post-Soviet environments. Chaadaev's theory concerning a fundamental separation between Russia and the inhabitants of other developed nations was as salient during the Stalin era as it was in the nineteenth century, and Berdiaev's model of the Russian idea is arguably more popular in the twenty-first century than at any other time in history. Moreover, while perceptions of the collectivist/individualist paradigm (and, by extension, the official/unofficial sociocultural paradigm) imagined by Bibler have changed considerably in the post-Soviet space, the question of the relationship between the individual and the state is still a defining issue in contemporary

Russian art. Particularly in the realm of *fantastika* cinema, issues of gender and power dynamics (Berdiaev), relationships to foreign culture and the “other” (Chaadaev), and conceptions of the individual’s place within the national dynamic (Bibler) have played an integral role in reconceptualizing Russian identity over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

One of the most notable advantages of my approach is the ability to reconsider periods of Russian and Soviet cultural history based on popular works of art, rather than political transitions. The periodization I have chosen is informed by analyses of individual works of *fantastika*, many of which appeared at times of critical political and social struggle. Thus, my analysis of Aleksei Tolstoi and Iakov Protazanov’s *Aelita* illustrates a new approach to conceptualizing 1920s sociocultural history, while my examination of Ivan Efremov and Evgenii Sherstobitov’s *Tumannost’ andromedy* advocates for a reconsideration of the Thaw and Stagnation periods. Moreover, while I acknowledge critical consequences of the transformation from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation on the Russian cultural mentality, my commentary on Peter Fleishmann’s *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein* and the *chernukha* of the 1990s illustrates the propensity for sociocultural issues to transcend political concerns (and even national boundaries). Thus, while my study is far from exhaustive, it represents a critical step forward in the attempt to redefine Russian cultural history in less political terms.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect in my study of Russian *fantastika* is the genre’s ability to transcend time to provide meaningful commentary on contemporary circumstances during various periods of Soviet and Russian history. Many of the films I have discussed are based on works of literature published decades before their premieres, and under significantly different



sociocultural circumstances. Nevertheless, their positive receptions indicate that the messages contained in their literary sources continued to resonate with contemporary audiences across disparate periods of Russian history. Thus, Sergei Lomkin's adaptation of Bulgakov's *Rokovye iaitsa* illustrates that a number of issues that were of importance in early Soviet society were also relevant in the 1990s; Gennadii Kazanskii and Vladimir Chebotarev's adaptation of Beliaev's *Chelovek-amfibiia* highlights a connection between cultural conditions in the 1920s and those of the 1960s; and Aleksei German's adaptation of the Strugatskiis' *Trudno byt' bogom* underscores important principles that were at play in domestic cultural dialogue from the late 1960s all the way to the 2010s. Russian *fantastika*'s ability to transcend time and propensity for allegorizing the national past, present, and future granted it a special place in national culture. As I have shown in my analysis, it is a crucial resource for future research on issues of national identity in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts.

While the search to define the Russian idea is an ongoing project, I have provided an analysis of more than two dozen attempts to approach the subject made by prominent figures in Russian *fantastika* literature and film. In doing so, I have traced a theoretical model for Russian identity that has been cumulatively added to by artists and theorists over the course of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. The contributions to the discussion made by authors and directors of *fantastika* in the period ranging from 1917 to 2017 are immense, and this study only touches the surface of their overall influence on Russian cultural dialogue. However, while I expect this dissertation to be considered a significant contribution to the study of Russian

culture in its own right, my primary hope is that it will serve as a model for future analyses of *fantastika*, film adaptations, and Russian identity in the modern age.

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