

Natalia Karakulina

To the Stars and back. The Influence of Yuri Gagarin's flight into Space on Soviet Science Fiction.

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Abstract

This paper will explore the ways that Soviet Russian science fiction responded to Yuri Gagarin's flight into space. It will suggest reasons why authors were more likely to set their works in space or on other planets before 1961, and why, as the decade went on, their writing came to explore other science fiction themes. The first Soviet fiction works about space appeared already in 1918, but it was at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers that the role of science fiction was officially established and preferable themes were outlined. Authors tended to write about the triumph of Communism in the near future, while fiction set in space was discouraged. The optimism that followed the post-Stalin Thaw of the mid-1950s was accompanied by an upsurge of science fiction works set in outer space. Ivan Efremov's novel *Andromeda Nebula*, published 1957, remains one of the most well known Soviet novels about space. Yuri Gagarin has shown that space travel is possible, and the space exploration which followed his flight turned space into reality. The theme was loosing its appeal both to the public and the authors, who turned their attention back to terrestrial concerns. Science fiction of the 1960s tended to become a vehicle for covert criticism of the Soviet system. Censors responded with heightened vigilance, making it much harder for the genre of science fiction to survive. The Strugatskii brothers' novel *Snail on the Slope* and its difficult publishing history provides an insight into the science fiction of the period.

To the Stars and back. The Influence of Manned Space Flight on Soviet Science Fiction

This paper was prompted by an article in a Russian online magazine *Mir Fantastiki*. The article, dedicated to Iurii Gagarin's flight into space, traced the history of soviet science fiction, arguing that this historic event caused science fiction writers to seek themes other than space travel for their stories. The aim of this paper is to show that while there was indeed a shift in themes in science fiction literature in the 1960s, and the development of this genre was related to the exploration of space, one does not follow the other, but instead is related to larger scientific developments in the world.

In order to trace the importance of Gagarin's achievement for soviet science fiction, it is necessary to analyse the main arguments and expectations regarding this genre prior to the event. Therefore, I start by describing the literary atmosphere of the newly established socialist Russia of early 1920s. Russian literature of that time was going through a period of uncertainty, with many authors welcoming the ideas of revolution and willing to propagate the will of the party, but not necessarily knowing how exactly to achieve this. I use Aleksei Tolstoi's novel *Aelita* as an example of moral and political ambiguity in the literature of the period.

In 1934 the First Writers Congress was held, where the Communist party presented writers with a depiction of what literature should aspire to be. Real life, and especially the life of the

proletariat was to become the centre of writers' attention. Science fiction writers found themselves on the margins of the soviet literary world.

However, as the party placed particular emphasis on the need to spread scientific knowledge, science fiction and space themes slowly became more popular, but the main focus was placed on introducing innovative scientific ideas to the population, and the artistic value of such works was generally low.

The 1960s brought great scientific achievements, including manned space flight. It was also the time when the place of Soviet science fiction was again re-evaluated. More and more articles appeared criticising science fiction for having little artistic merit. At the same time, writers began to explore non space related themes. The 1966 novel *Snail on the Slope*, which the Strugatskii brothers originally designed to be set in space, in the end focused on exploring absurdities of bureaucracy and ideas of the alien.

In the years following the Bolshevik assumption of power in 1917 attitudes to the nature and purpose of literature were diverse. On the one hand, there were countless artists, who welcomed the revolution and the idea of classless society. On the other, different literary groups were fighting for the right to be called the party's official representatives in art, accusing their adversaries of having anti-socialist mentality.

It was during this time, in 1923, that one of the most well known Russian works of space science fiction – *Aelita*, was written. Its author, Aleksei Tolstoi, used the space travel theories of scientist Konstantin Tsiolkovskii to bring his two protagonists, the scientist Los' and his travelling companion, ex-soldier Gusev, from the communist Russia of the future to Mars. The planet is inhabited by a humanoid civilization, which is suffering from population decline and is facing extinction, however, its leaders refuse to take action, saying that the Martians should peacefully and gracefully accept their fate. This idea is unpopular, and the society is on the brink of a civil war. Full of Russian recklessness Gusev leaps into action, and the revolution on Mars begins. However, after initial success, the revolution is suppressed and the protagonists barely manage to escape back to Earth, leaving Los' Martian lover behind.

This work is generally assigned to the genre of science fiction, as it describes the process of building a rocket and subsequent space travel. However, it can be argued that those parts of the narrative are included to provide a backdrop for describing social events, the development of characters and their relationships with each other. The editorial board of *Istoriia Russkoi Literatury XX veka. 20-50-e gody*, an anthology of Russian literature of 20-50-s, describe *Aelita* as social fantasy, a genre which uses science fiction elements as a set to focus on certain social and psychological conflicts¹.

¹ A. Avramenko, B. Bugrov, M. Golubkov, C. Kormilov, A. Ledenev, E. Skorospelova, N. Solntseva, *Istoriia Russkoi Literatury XX veka. 20-50-e gody* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 2006), p. 147.

As the Communist party established itself in power, its attention turned more closely towards literature. In 1934 the First Writers' Congress was held at which the party representative Andrei Zhdanov, gave a speech outlining what the party expected from the writers. Iosif Stalin called the writers 'engineers of human souls', and the Communist party believed that literature should play central role in public education². While this gave authors a high status, it also placed certain restrictions on their work. Zhdanov suggested that in order to become an engineer of human souls, a writer should, among other things, ground his work in real life, and not describe imaginary situations or imaginary heroes³.

Science fiction found itself at the margins of Russian literary world. A year later, in 1935, literary critic Mikhail Kozakov, summed up the literary reality of Soviet Russia, saying that soviet writers were simply not interested in introducing fantastical elements into their work⁴. Kozakov goes on to suggest that science fiction had the capacity to be the driving force behind inventions and discoveries.

The Communist party accorded great ideological significance to science, and to making Russia the most scientifically advanced country in the world. Rosalind Marsh in her work on *Soviet Fiction since Stalin: Science, Politics and Literature*, talks in some detail about how soviet authorities exploited literature in their campaign for science aimed at spreading scientific knowledge among the population⁵. While the extent of such literature was halted by World War 2, from the early 1950s more and more science fiction works appeared. However, their standards were quite different from that of the 1920s and *Aelita*. In 1950 Ingeneer V. Strukova and academic V. Shevchenko wrote down conventional views of the period on science fiction. They argue that 'the basis of every good book can be formed by only such scientific theory which is not a pure invention, but a continuation of science, the science of our Tomorrow, following from the achievements of the science of Today.'⁶ This article was published in *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, one of the major newspapers reviewing the literary life of the Soviet Union. The authors argue that the most important criteria for judging the success of a science fiction work is its realistic reflection of scientific problems. The authors also criticise the idea (which they find typical of bourgeois thinking), that humans are incapable of controlling nature⁷.

The idea of humanity taking full control of nature and utilising it to its full potential was dominant at the time, and was described in great detail in, what is now considered the most significant science-fiction work of the period, *The Andromeda Nebula*. Written in 1957 by

² A. Zhdanov, 'Rech sekretaria TsK VKP(b) A. A. Zhdanova', in *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei 1934 (Stenograficheskii Otchet)* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), p. 4. (All following translations from Russian are my own, and the originals presented after the reference; инженеры человеческих душ)

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ M. Kozakov, 'O fantasticheskikh proizvedeniiakh', *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, no. 28/519 (1935): p. 6.

⁵ R. J. Marsh, *Soviet Fiction since Stalin: Science, Politics and Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 6.

⁶ V. Strukova, V. Shevchenko, 'Fantasticheskie izmyshleniia vmesto nauchnoi fantastiki', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 5/2596 (1950): p. 3. (В основу хорошей книги может лечь только такое научное предположение, которое является не отвлечённым вымыслом, а продолжением науки, наукой нашего Завтра, вытекающей из достижений науки Сегодня)

⁷ *Ibid.*

Ivan Efremov, the novel has two main plot lines: the crew of the exploratory space ship Tantra are on their way home to Earth, but they are delayed by a forced landing. Meanwhile, their friends back on Earth are awaiting news from the crew. Tantra's struggle to get home and the experiences of the characters on Earth are secondary to the depiction of our planet and the society of the future: communism has fully established itself as the only socio-economic system and there are no individual countries. Human nature itself has changed. Scientific achievements enabled the people to improve the climate, and solve starvation. Thus an idyllic world exists, in which every human is driven by the desire to be a useful member of society.

Surprisingly, this novel, which became one of the most frequently reprinted works of soviet literature, was not mentioned at the 1960 discussion on the problems of contemporary science fiction held at the Moscow House of writers. The general view of the development of science fiction presented at the discussion proclaimed that: 'science-fiction writers' direct calling is to stand on the front line of struggle for our communist future'⁸. The speakers generally agreed that communist society should be at the centre of science fiction writer's focus. The importance of viability of scientific elements was also key in the topics of several speakers. This suggests that science fiction was still seen by many mainly as a tool for advancing scientific ideas and introducing them to the public. Several people in the discussion voiced their disapproval of the wide-spread usage of the space theme, arguing that writing about near future on Earth should be a dominant theme in science fiction.⁹

In 1957 Soviet Union launched its first satellite, Sputnik-1, proclaiming a new era. Space became the focus of public attention. In an article from 1960 the literary critic Vsevolod Revich sums up the general mood of the public: 'it is impossible to predict what will be discovered with man's each new step into space, but we know well that surely something will be discovered that even the most vivid imagination hasn't dreamed of.'¹⁰ In response to public's eager expectation of untold wonders from outer space, the topic became part of public theories and scientific debates.

Several months after the publication of this article in August of 1960 two dogs Belka and Strelka became the first animals to survive space travel. Less than a year later Yuri Gagarin achieved the final proof that space travel was no longer science fiction. His flight had far reaching consequences not only for space science, but also for the international political atmosphere.

⁸ G. Tushkan in 'Problemy sovremennoi fantastiki', *O literature dlia detei*, no. 5 (1960): p. 238. (Прямое призвание писателей-фантастов – находиться на первой линии борьбы за наше коммунистическое будущее)

⁹ Anon. 'Problemy sovremennoi fantastiki', *O literature dlia detei*, no. 5 (1960): pp. 328-338.

¹⁰ V. Revich, 'Fantasty, toropites'!', *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, no. 10 /4135 (1960): p. 1. (Невозможно предугадать, что именно будет открыто при каждом новом шаге человека в космосе, но мы хорошо знаем, что обязательно будет открыто нечто такое, что не грезилося и самому пылкому воображению)

While the world was celebrating space travel becoming a reality, soviet science fiction was undergoing its own changes. The importance of the quality of scientific information cultivated in literary criticism in the 1950s, was slowly replaced by critical articles and essays on the importance of the literary merits of science fiction works. In 1960 A. Siniavskii wrote: 'science-fiction is sometimes seen as half-literature, which has to be quite scientific but has the right not to be quite artistic.'¹¹ This opinion, which became more and more wide-spread through the early 1960s goes against the dominant view of the previous decade.

The demand for artistic merit was not the only change science-fiction was undergoing. As space travel became the topic of newspaper reports, science fiction writers turned to other topics. *The Snail on the Slope* by Boris and Arkadii Strugatskii is a prime example of this tendency. Again we are presented by two plot lines: the Bureau for Forest Affairs, where the philologist Perets is trying to get to see the Forest, but is refused a permit. Neither can he go back home, as he is refused a car. Thus he stays in the Bureau, witnessing its absurd life and strategies for controlling the alien forces represented by the Forest. Alongside comes the story of the ex-member of the Bureau, Kandid, whose helicopter crashed in the Forest. He has lost his memory and was saved by the aborigines. Kandid has glimpses of his previous life and is determined to return to the Bureau. In his attempt he learns that the Forest is controlled by the Amazons who have powers over life in the Forest and who have renounced men. The Amazons are attempting to destroy the aborigines' villages, but their efforts are no more organised than that of the Bureau. The novel finishes with Kandid returning to the aborigines, determined to protect them from the Amazons. Perets, in a surreal twist of events, finds himself the leader of the Bureau and, under pressure to create a new regulation, orders the members of the Extermination Division to exterminate themselves.

The novel was originally published in two parts. The Forest part was published first, in 1966. The second part was published nearly two years later in 1968. Shortly after the appearance of the second part magazine *Baikal*, where the authors used to publish their work, was deemed ideologically improper by the government. There are different opinions on whether this official condemnation was connected to the publication of the novel, however, regardless of the actual truth, critics accused the novel of being pessimistic and propagating the inhumanity of scientific progress¹².

The Strugatskii confessed that *Snail on the Slope* was first designed to be a space story about adventures of the astronaut Gorbovskii on a dangerous planet Pandora. However, according to the brothers they lost interest in this version of the plot as they wanted the story to introduce issues which were important for them at the time¹³.

¹¹ A. Siniavskii, 'Realizm fantastiki', *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, no. 2/6127 (1960): p. 3. (Научная фантастика рассматривается иногда как полу-литература, которая должна быть вполне научной, но имеет право быть не вполне художественной)

¹² L. Ashknazi, 'Ulitka na Sklone: kriticheskaia retseptsiia, analiz reaktsii kritikov, literatorov i chitatelei', at *Biblioteka Moshkova*, http://fan.lib.ru/a/ashkinazi_1_a/text_2410.shtml (2006) [accessed 08 August 2011].

¹³ A. Strugatskii, B. Strugatskii, 'Davaite dumat' o budushchem', *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, no. 6/4240 (1970): p. 5.

In the same article, published in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* in 1970, the Strugatskii gave an overview of science fiction. Written over 40 years ago, it still proves to be poignant. They separated ‘science fiction’ from ‘fantastic realism’¹⁴. According to them, science fiction focuses on representing innovative scientific ideas and aims at educating the population and introducing science to young people. ‘Fantastic realism’ (a term created by the Strugatskii) focuses on the relationship among individuals and between individuals and society, using fantastical elements as a background.

Therefore ‘science fiction’, according to the Strugatskii, is a relatively new genre, born from scientific discoveries, and ‘fantastic realism’ is as old as literature itself. The Strugatskii brothers predicted that ‘science fiction’ would only exist as a genre in a society which valued and was actively interested in scientific achievements, while ‘fantastic realism’ would always exist and was likely to become increasingly popular in the future, to reflect the complexities of the modern world¹⁵.

From 1917 to the 1960s soviet science fiction underwent a series of transformations; from the uncertain conclusions about communism, to detailed depictions of innovative scientific ideas, to future utopias. While depictions of communist society on earth dominated works of soviet science fiction, space has always remained a popular theme, both for those who wanted to depict a social drama and those who were interested in exploring scientific theories of space travel.

Starting from the 1960s both the focus and the themes of soviet science fiction started to change. It was a gradual process; more and more critics picked up on the fact that science fiction works had little artistic merit, as one had to be, first of all, a scientist in order to write works in which fantasy was grounded in the technology of the day. As fewer writers with background in science were published, professional writers would more often use science fiction elements as a set up for the development of their characters. The Strugatskii brothers argued that such use of science fiction should have a separate genre name: ‘fantastic realism’. They suggested that as writers were experiencing the world which was becoming more and more complex, ‘fantastic realism’ would become more and more popular.

Thus Yuri Gagarin’s flight into space seemingly coincides with the shift in science fiction, creating an illusion that the two events are connected. Indeed they are, but one does not follow the other as might appear. Instead, they are both results of scientific, and on a larger scale, political developments in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and while one represents the great optimism as humankind entered a new era of technological progress, the other results from the complexities which arose from such rapid technological advance.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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