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Yvonne Howell

University of Richmond, yhowell@richmond.edu

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From 'Sots-Romanticism' to Rom-Com:

The Strugatskys' *Monday Begins on Saturday* as a Film Comedy

Part I: Soviet Science Fiction as a Form of Soc(ialist) Romanticism

The Strugatsky brothers' novella *Ponedel'nik nachinaetsia v subbotu* [*Monday Begins on Saturday*; 1965] is one of the most beloved, widely quoted, and comedic works of science fiction in post-war Soviet literature. *Monday* is about the adventures of a young computer programmer who happens into a position at a top-secret scientific research institute located in a small town in the Russian Far North. The story is set in the early 1960s, when the twin processes of de-Stalinization and the *sputnik*-era valorization of rational science and technology reached their peak. In the Khrushchev years, a repudiation of the irrational goals and mystical terror that defined Stalin's "cult of personality" was accompanied by a newfound belief in the humane, curative potential of mathematics, cybernetics, physics, and the other exact sciences. It seemed that these objective disciplines, rather than grotesque ideological excesses, would finally usher in the communist future: thanks to science, there would be efficient agriculture, abundant energy sources, a rationalized economy, and even spectacular explorations of outer space. The scientific institute in the Strugatskys' 1965 novella is above all a place of possibility, hope and inspiration, where young researchers are so enthralled by experiments on the sub-atomic universe (suggesting the possibilities of time travel, instantaneous data transfer, molecular rejuvenation, etc.) that they willingly forgo weekend days off, gleefully admitting that in their world, "Monday begins on Saturday."

Critics have often attributed the tremendous resonance of *Monday* to the novella's subversive satire of ideological dogma in the sciences, as well as to the irreverent quality of its humor, which transforms the stock characters of Russian national folklore (e.g. the talking cat, the

golden pike, the self-serving table cloth) into subjects of rationalist explanation and astringent social commentary (e.g. the cat seems to be developing a case of sclerosis, the fish is grumpy about environmental pollution, the table cloth skimps on portion size). In general, Cold War criticism proceeded from the assumption that readers were titillated by exposés of stupidity and corruption in the Soviet regime. In this paper, I will develop the proposition that *Monday's* real appeal lay, on the contrary, in its highly romanticised, zany positive interpretation of the scientific ethos in Soviet society. At the same time, by deploying the topoi of literary romanticism, rather than pedantic realism, to convey the ascendancy of Soviet science, *Monday* challenged the goals of the so-called “scientific-technological revolution”¹ in a way that could not be translated to the Soviet screen in the 1970s and 80s.

The Strugatskys first agreed to write a screenplay based on *Monday* in the early 1970s for the Dovzhenko State Film Studio in Kiev. The screenplay they submitted, which followed the novella fairly closely, was rejected as “malicious slander towards Soviet science” and the project died (Strugatsky 2003, 248). It revived in 1977, when the State Committee for Television and Radio [*Gosteleradio*] approved a new proposal to adapt *Monday* for the screen. The Strugatskys reworked their screenplay again, and in this rewrite the meaning of the original title was lost. The new version bore the title “*Charodei*” [“The Magicians”], but this project also stalled until mutual friends introduced Arkady Strugatsky to the Moscow-based director Konstantin Bromberg. In 1979, Bromberg was enjoying the resounding success of his three-part televised movie for young adolescents, *Prikliucheniia Elektronika* [*The Adventures of Elektronik*; USSR 1979]. In an era that was characterized by a sharp divide between *auteur* and “commercial” filmmakers -- the two niches

¹ Scientific-Technological Revolution (STR) was a crucial and oft-repeated term in Soviet ideology during the Khrushchev era. It referred to a post-war scientific and technological surge in the context of socialism, which was uniquely capable (so the argument went) of applying those advances to everyday social progress, not just the arms race and international prestige.

available to artists beholden to a State-controlled cinema industry -- Bromberg was clearly a “commercial” artist who responded to the State’s call for movies with mass appeal. *Elektronik* was an uplifting story about a schoolboy and his best friend (and physical double), a robot who wants to become a human. The film’s depiction of a Soviet childhood, dislocated slightly into the future, became a seminal cultural text for its viewers (Kukulin sec 1), who reached adulthood about ten years later, just as the Soviet Union collapsed. However, at the time when Arkady Strugatsky agreed to work with Bromberg on a TV adaptation of *Monday*, the collaboration was viewed in the context of the prevailing *auteur* versus “mass entertainment” binary. Bromberg (2013) recalls running into the uncompromising *auteur* Andrei Tarkovsky, who commented “Young man, you have your work cut out for you,” presumably based on Tarkovsky’s experience of completely transforming the Strugatskys’ novel *Roadside Picnic* (going through innumerable different drafts of the screenplay) to produce his internationally acclaimed art film *Stalker* (USSR 1979). Bromberg, for his part, simply relayed the authorities’ instructions to the Strugatskys: they had been asked to write a musical comedy that could be shown as a New Year’s Eve special. The Strugatskys’ biographer Skalandis captures this moment as a paradox, in which the increasingly censored authors of complex science fictional parables set to work on light comedy:²

[A]nd so Arkady Strugatsky begins the next round in the epic saga of adapting ‘Monday’ for the screen. This time it will be a musical (!). Therefore, the original screenplay will no longer suffice, he has to write a new one. The idea (of a musical) comes from the director Konstantin Bromberg [...]

² In 1965 the Strugatskys submitted a dark, absurdist parable called *Snail of the Slope* [*Ulitka na sklone*] for publication. The “Kandid” half of the novel was included in an anthology of stories in 1966, but the “Perets” half was only published two years later, in the journal *Baikal* (Ulan-Ude). Censors quickly pulled both the anthology and the journal issues from circulation. The forbidden novella started to circulate in underground *samizdat* publications, and then appeared as an unauthorized publication in the West (Frankfurt-am-Main: Possev Verlag, 1972). Throughout the 1970s, they wrote a succession of ideologically ambiguous novels depicting dysfunctional future societies, many of which were heavily censored or banned from publication.

Thus begins 1980, a year which will not get any better, either for our country or for the world as a whole: the large-scale invasion of Afghanistan, the boycott of the Moscow Olympics, the bloody events in Poland, the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, the American hostages in Iran -- nothing but a worsening of the Cold War [...] And against this backdrop, Arkady gets to work on a light-hearted musical called 'The Magicians.' (Skalandis 238-9)

In fact, the Strugatskys found it easy to work with Bromberg. They understood the parameters of the contemporary Soviet musical comedy and produced an entirely new screenplay. The final version retained the notion of magi working in a research institute, but the story was no longer about scientists limning the frontiers of knowledge; rather, it was about quasi-scientists charged with adding some magic to the consumer service industry. This shift allowed the Strugatskys to poke fun at Soviet bureaucracy and fickle human emotions, rather than probe the inspiring and dangerous extremes of human creativity in an era of cosmic exploration and nuclear power. In short, almost nothing other than a few character names and motifs were left of the original *Monday Begins on Saturday*, and most of the novella's philosophical irony was replaced by the comedy of lovers' misunderstandings. A letter from Arkady to his brother in September 1979 (Bondarenko) reports that Central Television has approved ("with accolades to the authors") the new screenplay, which included stage directions and suggestions for musical numbers. At this point the Strugatskys left the project, and Bromberg scrambled to put his vision – for casting, musical numbers, set location, and *mise-en-scène* – into place by the turn of the next New Year. *Charodei* [*The Magicians*] premiered on Central Television's Channel 1 on the evening of December 31, 1982. For viewers who were expecting a film imbued with at least the tone (if not the plot) of the Strugatskys' science fiction, Bromberg's *The Magicians* was a terrible disappointment. On the other hand, the New Year's Eve special was a resounding success on its own terms – the casting was

superb, the musical numbers became instant hits, and as one contemporary reviewer acknowledged, the film “drew viewers into its entertaining and slightly madcap fun” (Iakovlev). *The Magicians* was shown every December 31 thereafter until the collapse of the USSR. In post-Soviet Russia, it still appears regularly as holiday fare, where it holds a place among other seasonal “classics.”

A comparison of the original literary text and the film adaptation allows us to theorize two concomitant aesthetic strategies that shaped the subjective experience of living in the last decades of the Soviet twentieth century. On the one hand, what we may provisionally call “soc(ialist)-romanticism” [*sotsromantizm*] could provide forms of dynamic affective and intellectual engagement with the world of late socialism.³ On the other hand, the escapist genres of mass entertainment (for instance, detective fiction and romantic comedies) often used their formulaic structures to depict a self-contained world of exotic intrigue or private melodrama, seemingly detached from engagement with systemic ideological or social forces.⁴ In this way, mass entertainment could help define a collective fate of enchantment or suspended reality, in which everyone senses that time has come to a halt, yet everyone participates in fictional illusions of time suddenly “opening up” (re-starting time is often accomplished in spatial metaphors). This paper explores two modes of late Soviet aesthetics -- provisionally described as *sots*-romanticism and the comedy of enchantment -- and suggests that they existed in an unstable balance – one providing

³ A word on the word: Soviet discourse was filled with ponderous abbreviations, so that the ubiquitous adjective “socialist” was often shortened to its first syllable, pronounced “*sots*.” The concept of “*sotsromantizm*” maintains this feature slightly ironically, while also punning on its counter-concept of socialist realism (*sotsrealizm*). My use of the proposed paradigm in this article is greatly inspired (and indebted to) an on-going project to identify the parameters of “*sotsromantizm*” which has been initiated by a working group led by Serguei Oushakine.

⁴ The aesthetics of “normalization” that reigned in Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s and early 1980s performed a somewhat analogous role. As Paulina Bren has shown, after the aborted Prague Spring of 1968, the aesthetics of skillfully made Czech TV serials afforded viewers the genuine pleasures of watching family dramas and small-town crime stories, while also reaffirming the primacy of private life and family concerns. Viewers who avidly followed the drama of fictional characters’ private lives were able to identify their own concerns within this sphere, without engaging the larger ideological narrative offered by the State.

paths of real meaning and genuine engagement; another hinting at the desirability of an unexpected shift into a completely new social and power structure.⁵

Oushakine and others have recently proposed the concept of “*sots-romanticism*” as a response to the inadequacy of existing theoretical frameworks for describing life as it was experienced in the late Soviet period (conventionally designated as 1961-1991). For the most part, this experience has been forced into a set of assumed binary categories, such as official/unofficial, public/private, cynical/genuine, performed/authentic, censored/uncensored, and so on. When the last Soviet decades are theorized in this way, society is reduced to a population of citizens who spoke in “double-speak” and constantly negotiated a stark choice between “living a lie” (public performance of agreeing with the regime) and “living in truth” (staking the claim to live authentically).⁶ By now it seems clear that these old binaries fail to describe the subjective experience of a large sector of the last Soviet generation. Oushakine has suggested that when we examine diaries, memoirs, private letters, photo albums, taste in books and music, and narratives of growing up, they all speak to a much greater degree of connection and hybridity between what one believed and did not believe, and what one felt and only pretended to feel about the life made possible by the Soviet regime. Much of Soviet cultural production in this late period reflects the viability of participating in official ideals while distancing oneself from official policies, or, put another way, many books and films depict (or in fact generate) a viable space of individual

⁵ Following the seminal analyses of Northrop Frye, Hayden White, and other theorists of Western narrative modes, we can define the Romance as a structure that highlights the drama of self-realization, including the hero’s triumph over evil and movement towards a brave new world. The structure of the Comedy highlights harmony between natural and social imperatives, so that the achieved reconciliation is always a cause for celebration.

⁶ Vaclav Havel used these terms to describe the binary in his influential essay “The Power of the Powerless” [originally written in Czechoslovakia and circulated in samizdat as *Moc bezmocných*; 1978].

empowerment and freedom whose dimensions are marked, but not necessarily reduced, by the force field of the State's restrictions.

Indeed, one of the hallmarks of the so-called "Thaw" in cultural politics in the post-Stalin years was the assault by writers and readers alike on the aesthetics of socialist realism. A generic blueprint that mandated the mimetic portrayal of reality, while also insisting on the subservience of the individual to a preordained collective cause, could not provide useful models for re-launching the communist dream in an era of unprecedented technological and scientific advancements. Instead, from the mid-1950s on, critics called for more "sincerity" (Pomerantsev), more "phantasy" (Tertz), and more attention to the individual in literature. Writers who (re)invoked the romantic tropes of the visionary genius, the discovery of new worlds, and the synthesis of reason and passion were in fact able to model a desired (but still Soviet) space of authenticity, imagination, and individual self-realization. At the same time, while from the late 1950s on "sincerity" and "humanism" became buzzwords in the humanities, Soviet science took the cultural offensive by claiming its omnipotence not only in matters of engineering and material production, but even in the traditionally humanistic tasks of envisioning the future and harmonizing human relations.⁷ Many observers recalled the spirit of the times in similar terms to the memoirist A.V. Skutin:

The words on everyone's lips were the same: atomic energy, thermonuclear synthesis, elementary particles, proton, mezon, annihilation reaction. Everyone awaited miracles from the physicists, such as controlled thermonuclear reactions that would provide a limitless ocean of energy. (Qtd. in Bogdanov)

⁷ The ensuing debate became known as the "physicists versus the lyricists," and can be viewed as roughly analogous to the debates over the gap between "The Two Cultures" ignited by C.P. Snow's eponymous essay (1959). For an expansive recent account of the "physicists vs. lyricists" controversies, see Konstatin Bogdanov (2011).

On the pages of the weekly political and cultural newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta*, a typically impassioned editorial advocated an even more transcendent vision of a scientific-artistic holism:

Wouldn't it be better to transfer our debate over the importance of the arts from the narrow path of 'art versus science' to the wide road of 'art and life'? [...] The task [will be] to investigate and assimilate the heroism of both the material and spiritual achievements of our people, as manifested in all spheres, such as: the struggle to elevate our economic and cultural level, to ensure peace all over the world, the friendship of nations, and the affirmation of a new morality (Saliev 3).

Thus, the apparent stand-off between "lyricists" and "physicists" proved to be something else entirely; namely, the foundation of a powerful ideological *synthesis* which strove to reconcile the humanists' dream of spiritual fulfillment with the scientists' promise of material fulfillment. A typical pronouncement of the time articulated the resulting arch-romantic ideal:

[Our] Soviet era is characterized by a great breakthrough in the straining of the masses towards prosperity; [it is characterized] by the optimalization of human nature in an organic unity of reason and feeling, an optimization only dreamed of previously by humanity's greatest minds (Qtd. in Bogdanov).

It follows that by the mid-1960s, much of Soviet literature and visual culture was more informed by the tropes of romanticism than by the neoclassical aesthetics of socialist realism.

Part II. *Sots-Romanticism* and Comedy on the Soviet Screen

The exemplary cinematic expression of Soviet scientific romanticism is Mikhail Romm's 1961 drama *Deviat dnei odnogo goda* [*Nine Days of One Year*]. In this film, a dedicated nuclear scientist is conducting a series of groundbreaking experiments that will lead to a safe technology for splitting the atom and releasing its unlimited energy. Unbeknownst to most of his colleagues and his devoted young wife, he has already been exposed to high doses of radiation and will not survive another dose. Yet, in a race against time, he forges on with his experiments. Romm returned to the avant-garde aesthetics of the 1920s to create a striking visual representation of his Promethean theme. Filmed in black and white on location at a nuclear station in Siberia, the white-coated scientists are dwarfed by the enormous geometric shapes of accelerators, reactors, and holding tanks. The Promethean hero must not only crack the codes of nature, but also master the power of his own machines. Ultimately, he triumphs over both, but at the cost of his life. Although the film raises the ethical question of what it means to create a technology for the benefit of humanity that can also destroy humanity, the protagonist's sacrifice is justified in the name of the future. At the end of the film, the hero's impending death is not a tragedy, but an emblem of hope for a new era, in which atomic power will provide the country "with infinite warmth, light, and motion."⁸

In *Monday Begins on Saturday*, the Strugatskys picked up the theme of Promethean science and its ethical implications, but in their treatment, the protagonist-scientists were sketched as endearingly fallible contemporaries, not superhuman martyrs. The ethical question of whether scientific rationality and spiritual progress should be synthesized at all (as the ideal "organic unity

⁸ This phrase is repeated twice by the taciturn protagonist, in answer to his friend's concern about the non-peaceful uses of atomic energy. The dream of infinite "warmth, light, and motion" has always had a particular resonance in the Russian cultural imagination, in part because of the geophysical parameters of the empire. In Imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet times, matters of energy and transportation have dominated Russian folk culture and Russian political policy in unusual ways. For instance, Lenin famously equated achieving communism with providing electricity (light) for the whole country; Brezhnev hoped to reverse the flow of the Siberian rivers to solve energy and transportation problems. Moreover, literary fantasy and reality often intertwined in the Soviet Union's accelerated campaigns to conquer time and space. See Banerjee (2012).

of reason and feeling”) was wrapped into an entertaining plot about New Year’s Eve hijinks inside the so-called Scientific Research Institute of Sorcery and Enchantment.⁹ The novella managed to present the enthusiasm and noble ideals of the era’s young scientists in a way that was skeptical of untenable ideals, but also inspiring and boldly in favor of unconventional thinking. The opening sequence of the novella is worth a closer look, because it illustrates the key features of *sots-*romanticism: it provides readers with a version of the Soviet socialist world that is recognizably backwards and bureaucratic, yet somehow also filled with the kind of unlimited creativity and adventures of spirit that could hardly be imagined to arise outside of that world. Its humor derives from the details that capture the unique romanticism of this moment – the exhilarating feeling that all that stubborn Russian (and now Soviet) backwardness is so close to magically disappearing under the wand of objective science, that one can already afford to find the backwardness ironic and even liberating. The generic conventions of socialist realism depict manifestations of naïve and backwards life as elements that are opposed to reality “as it should be;” in the realist mode, these elements must be overcome or corrected. Socialist romanticism, by contrast, transforms manifestations of primitive or uncultivated life into a rich source material, from which extraordinary, untethered human creativity draws its inspiration.

Thus, on the opening pages of *Monday*, Alexander (“Sasha”) Privalov is bumping along unpaved roads somewhere north of Leningrad on his way to meet friends for a camping trip. His rented car can hardly cope with the bad conditions of the roads, but Privalov’s worldview glorifies the road less traveled: “Why buy a car if one is only going to drive on asphalt? Where there is asphalt, there is nothing interesting; where there is something interesting, there is no asphalt” (Strugatsky 1992, 7-8). Two hunters with old-fashioned rifles emerge onto the forest road in hopes of hitching a ride. Privalov is delighted to have the company, and everyone (including the reader)

⁹ NIICHAVO. The institute's acronym in Russian means (slightly misspelled) 'nothing.'

smiles wryly at the fact that the door of the car has to be “consistently slammed” before it holds shut, yet the mud-splattered hitchhikers turn out to be witty theoretical physicists who study “the same thing as all science – humanity’s happiness” (8). When the two physicists find out that their accidental driver is trained in the latest computer technology, they talk him into coming to work at their mysterious research institute. Russian readers still quote the famous pick-up line, which ironically combines eternal superstition with scientific zeal: “Personally, I see the hand of fate in this! Here we were, trudging through the forest, and we stumble across a computer programmer!” (8).

Privalov spends his first night as a guest of the institute. The sofa he sleeps on turns out to be a prop concealing one of the institute’s most coveted experiments – a “universal translator” that converts real events into their fairytale equivalents. Unfortunately for Privalov, the sofa still functions imperfectly. A night of inexplicable hallucinations, including encounters with talking cats and immortal hags, does not dissuade Privalov from accepting the position of programmer at the Scientific Research Institute of Sorcery and Enchantment. He is young, educated, intellectually ambitious, fashionably dressed in Western beatnik styles and fashionably un-affiliated with the Party. He is also free to join a team of high-energy biophysicists and cyberneticists at a cutting-edge research institute that is remote (both geographically and practically) from conservative centers of power.¹⁰ Privalov has a tremendous work ethic and a sensitive moral compass. He is, in short, a quintessentially Strugatskian hero in the quintessentially Strugatskian space of romanticized socialism: a space that values intellectual autonomy, scientific imagination, and ethical seeking all the more so, because the future of these ideals is still threatened by opposing forces.

¹⁰ Soviet “science cities” were built in regions far from Moscow and populated by a relatively youthful, highly educated cohort. This combination of factors created a famously “liberal” microculture, whose atmosphere is captured in *Red Plenty* (Spufford).

The satirical brunt of *Monday Begins on Saturday* falls on sclerotic bureaucratic restrictions and the ideological dogma that threaten the development not only of scientific thought, but of a more enlightened society in general. However, the romanticism of *Monday* suggests that several paths to the future are still open, and that the Privalovs of the world may inaugurate the right one – and even have fun and do good science in the process. This interpretation is articulated quite literally in the closing passage of the novel, when the Institute’s supreme magus tells Privalov that “[a] single future does not exist. There are many, and each one of your actions creates one of them” (188). Like Romm’s film *Nine Days*, the Strugatskys’ novella complicated the relationship between intellectual heroism and morality. Despite the difference in tone and genre, both the science fiction tale and the nuclear power station drama conveyed a clear message about the intellectuals’ responsibility for the shape of the future. The novelty of these reform-era texts lies in the perceived shift in responsibility for the future from Party stalwarts and loyal workers to creative, free-thinking physicists, computer programmers, and engineers. *Monday* leaves the future open to the latter, and the book’s last sentence tells us only that “[w]hat happened next is really an altogether different story” (188).

In order to adapt *Monday* as musical comedy, the Strugatskys did indeed need to write an altogether different story. By the early 1980s, the promise of “scientific-technological revolution” had dissipated, and the moral high ground that the scientists briefly occupied had slipped away. The Strugatskys’ science fiction after 1968 is increasingly concerned with diagnosing the inability of both the “physicists” and the “lyricists” (roughly, post-Stalin intelligentsia) to guide society out of a deepening crisis. *Monday* turned out to be the Strugatskys’ last optimistic treatment of the romance of science; their subsequent work kept testing the connection between knowledge and progress, only to reveal the ethical perils of this Enlightenment ideal. When their works could no longer affirm Soviet-style Enlightenment thought, even in the fantastic alternate spaces of science fiction,

they found it increasingly difficult to publish anything. As their biographer noted, 1980 was not a good year for proposing difficult, critical parables of Cold War realities to Soviet censorship. Instead, the Strugatskys got to work on a New Year's Eve fairytale for adults.

In this fairytale, a handsome young man works at a State piano factory in Moscow. He is engaged to a beautiful young woman, Alyona [Aleksandra Iakovleva], who works as a sorceress in the Scientific Universal Institute of Unexpected Services (the acronym reads comically as NU-I-NU, a Russian expression of incredulity). The institute has just completed the first successful trial of a magic wand that conjures up small luxuries (e.g. a bouquet of flowers) on demand. The new product will be showcased for the authorities at a celebratory New Year's Eve ball. Most of the action takes place in the Institute, where Alyona is adored by her young secretarial assistants and by the folksy woodworkers in the magical carpentry shop. On the other hand, although Alyona's senior colleagues are accomplished magi, their careerism and petty jealousies are immediately apparent. The institute's Directress Shemakhanskaya [Ekaterina Vasil'eva] lets ambition get in the way of her love life; her suitor Kivrin [Valerii Zolotukhin] begins to lose patience and innocently flirts with Alyona; the Deputy Director Sataneev [Valentin Gaft] has less noble designs on Alyona and seizes an opportunity to ignite a terrible misunderstanding. The plot is set in motion when Sataneev convinces Shemakhanskaya that her suitor plans to run off with Alyona to Moscow. Shemakhanskaya immediately casts a spell that turns Alyona into a cold-hearted, calculating b(w)itch. The spellbound Alyona cannot remember her original, pure love, and instead tries to advance her career by pretending to respond positively to Sataneev's propositions. The spell will be broken if Alyona lets her true fiancé kiss her before the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve. In the end, everyone's happiness is resolved: the faithful secretaries and carpenters contrive to

transport Alyona's fiancé from Moscow to the ball on time, the wand's debut is a triumph for all, and Shemakhanskaya accepts Kivrin's eighth proposal of marriage with newfound joy and affection. In this way, the plot moves away from the romantic imperative to overcome and/or transform the existing order, and instead works as a true comedy, which reaffirms the essential harmony of the social and natural order.

The social order depicted in *The Magicians* is one that would have been familiar to Soviet moviegoers in the late 1970s and early 1980s in most respects. The romantic comedies of this period depicted hapless lovers trying to find some kind of private happiness in an inert system. In the exemplary 1975 film *Irony of Fate* [*Ironiia sud'by*; dir. Ryazanov] a party of New Year's Eve revelers gets so drunk that one of them mistakenly boards a flight to Leningrad. Still inebriated, he takes a taxi to his address (same street name as in Moscow) and lets himself into a seemingly identical building and apartment as the one he inhabits in Moscow. The female occupant of the Leningrad apartment is at first appalled, and then touched, and a bittersweet romantic comedy is set into motion. The film's initial premise was easily understood as a critique of the homogenous, faceless landscape produced by Soviet urban planning. In a similar vein, *The Magicians* pokes fun at acceptable targets, such as dull bureaucrats and tasteless urban architecture. Bromberg cast the brilliant character actor Semyon Farada as the "Guest from the South" (in Soviet terms, this means a volatile but charming trader from one of the Caucasus republics), who wants to purchase inventory of the new magic wand. Most of action within NU-I-NU was shot in the enormous Ostankino television center located on the outskirts of Moscow. The "Guest from the South" becomes lost in the endless corridors and stairwells of the building, famously wailing "*Who builds this way?!*"

In Bromberg's cinematic vision, however, the anomie of the lost "little man" in a generically over-sized Soviet office building is not a symptom of the comedy's ultimately "ironic and elegiac" (Kukulin sec.5) denouement, in which star-crossed lovers go their separate ways. Bromberg does not dwell on alienation as a source of comic material any more than he exploits the romantic tropes of testing the unknown and overcoming nature. By the end of *The Magicians*, nobody is alienated, and everybody is dancing: lovers and bureaucrats, bosses and secretaries, as well as the Guest, are all equal participants in the final musical number. Yet it is impossible to read the finale as an unambiguous affirmation of the status quo. Brezhnev-era aesthetics offered resignation and small private happiness in a minor key, while Bromberg's finale is an anarchic dance scene choreographed to a song that repeatedly tells one "not to believe" (*ty ne ver', ty ne ver'*) the old wisdom, because old wisdom cannot hold in a world that is "dazzlingly young" (*mir oslepitel'no molod*). The finale is buoyantly orchestrated, and the lyrics suggest a radical break with the status quo. The dancers move freely, yet everyone at the ball converges spontaneously into a larger collective by the end. Compared to the smaller, constrained happiness of individual adults who find each other in other Brezhnev-era rom-coms, Kukulin suggests that the anarchic convergence of youthful energy in Bromberg's films may be seen as an intimation of something still to come – the chaotic mass demonstrations of the perestroika period at the end of the 1980s.¹¹ The song's chorus describes an alternate world that belongs only to those who are young enough at heart:

Multicolored, huge and joyous,

Beholden to neither days nor years,

¹¹ Kukulin's article refers only to *The Adventures of Elektronik*. I have used it to help elucidate aspects of *The Magicians* as well.

This world is dazzlingly young,

Only as old as we are.

Bromberg went out of his way to cast Soviet cinema's two leading sex symbols in the roles of the enchanting/enchanted Alyona and her Prince Charming (traditionally named "Ivan," or "Ivanushka") from Moscow. In the role of Alyona's fiancé Ivanushka, the actor Aleksandr Abdulov projected a youthful ardor that is nevertheless far more conservative than the brilliant, striving scientists who were ready to lead the way to a better future in *Monday* and in films like *Nine Days of One Year*. As Alyona's suitor, Abdulov is dreamily handsome, yet politely deferential to his elders. The entire problematic of whether "physicists" or "lyricists" should own the future is dismissed in the film's first song, which tells us that even the mightiest magi "[c]an't order the heart [to love]." In other words, the film abandons the motif of science in order to reaffirm the primacy of folk wisdom and true feelings. Abdulov's counterpart was played by Aleksandra Iakovleva, a glamorous beauty who had bared her breasts for a memorably sultry scene in the 1979 Soviet blockbuster "Flight Crew" [*Ekipazh*; dir. Mitta]. Iakovleva's difficult personality caused serious tensions on the set, prompting Bromberg to quip "Sure, she can play a witch, but can she play the nice Alyona?" ("Vsia Pravda" 2012). Although the mutual antipathy between Iakovleva and the renowned actor Valentin Gaft (Sataneev) caused logistical problems (they insisted on being filmed in separate takes), the visceral differences between the older actor and the sexy young star added another dimension to the comedy of a bickering couple. On screen, Gaft seems to incarnate the inglorious banality of the existing system, which cannot satisfy even the bewitched Alyona, who screams at him: "I want you to be young!" With all the Institute's potions and magic books at his disposal, Sataneev still cannot regain his youth, because in this film what is young, new, and promising is associated not with the past, but with a radical break into the future.

The most important harbinger of the future – a future that rejects the old system of values, but has not clearly articulated new ones – is the character of Ivan’s younger sister, a school child. Part One of *The Magicians* concludes as Ivan is summoned out of Moscow to rescue his beloved by breaking the spell with his kiss. Although Ivan doesn’t understand anything about magic or about Alyona’s Institute, it turns out that he has a precocious younger sister who seems to grasp the way things work in the world. Ivan is the sole adult guardian of this sixth-grader; the absence of any other family members is irrelevant and never explained. What is more important is how the relationship between the modern “prince” and his young sister points to a disjuncture between the reaffirming closure of the folk or fairytale and the radical perspective latent in science fiction. While Abdulov’s appeal has to do with his character’s good looks and sincerity, the strikingly independent behavior of the preadolescent sister is more in keeping with the aura children project in Bromberg’s film *Elektronik* and in the Strugatskys’ other science fiction works. The children in these science fictional texts seem to be far wiser and more liberated than their elders, as if they have foreknowledge of a post-Soviet future, in which the parents’ world will be made suddenly irrelevant by the advent of unprecedented new freedoms.

Part Two of *The Magicians* opens as Ivan and his sister arrive at the tiny train station in the forest surrounding the NU-I-NU institute. A magnificent troika of white horses hitched to a sleigh will whisk them off to their lodgings. In the Strugatskys’ screenplay, all the songs were composed by the “bard” singer Iulii Kim, in the thoughtful and often “Aesopian” vein that was typical of the single-guitar, solo singer genre.¹² Kim’s lyrics for the song “Troika Chase” retain the modality of *Monday*’s opening scene, where freedom is understood as the exploration of the unknown. In Kim’s song, the last couplet concludes “[Give me] only the forest hush/wild wind and lands afar/This song of courage/And a beautiful maiden.” As we have seen, Bromberg’s aesthetic relied completely on a

¹² Kim’s lyrics (which were never used) are available online (“Iulii Kim: Pesni”). Translations are my own. Instead, the movie used lyrics by Leonid Derbenev.

different kind of music; namely, the Western-inflected pop orchestrations of composer Evgenii Krylatov. The exhilarating sleigh ride marks a high point in the film, as the prince (Ivan), along with his little sister, is rushed to the rescue of the bewitched princess. In and of itself, the image of the troika careening through a snowy winter landscape is an ineluctable allusion to Gogol's literary verdict on Russia in *Dead Souls*: "Russia, where are you flying to? Answer! She gives no answer" (Gogol [1842] 1961). Therefore, it is significant that the entire scene – and the song – belongs to the self-confident child, who belts out a hymn to unplanned freedom:

They carry me away, they carry me away
Into the ringing snowy yonder
Three white horses, three white horses,
December, January, and February!

An orchestra of string instruments and soaring trumpet lines accompanies the exuberant repetition of this chorus. Time ("December, January, February") is metonymically transformed into three galloping horses, moving forward into an almost unlimited future.

In conclusion, it is possible that although *The Magicians* was billed as a fairytale for adults, it includes many of the techniques Bromberg used so effectively in *Elektronik* to convey the radical otherness that is latent in youth culture. Bromberg's final choices in casting, musical composition, and *mise-en-scène* effectively created a different kind of fairytale. The Strugatskys' screenplay and preferred songwriter produced a gently ironic love-conquers-all plot to serve as a vehicle for permissible swipes at Brezhnev-era consumer services. This formula had already been successfully worked out in other Soviet romantic comedies. Bromberg's film begins to depart from the Strugatskys' screenplay and from generic expectations when it incorporates important elements of

“youth film” into the familiar rom-com production, thereby transforming *The Magicians* into a more layered and multivalent work. The significance of these elements in the context of Bromberg’s collaboration with the Strugatskys becomes clear if we recall the key semantic features of “youth films” in the late Soviet period: 1) the figure of the teen (or child) senses the inadequacy of established norms, and struggles to define a new set of values, tastes, and guiding ideas; and 2) the youth represent dissatisfaction with constraints on their identity, but have not yet articulated the foundations of a new identity (Klimova 11-12). However, in the Soviet context the younger generation’s rebellion can stand in for the alienation of “liberal” adult society under the constraints of a repressive regime. *The Magicians* could be enjoyed as a rom-com that partakes of traditional Russian folk tale logic – the good Ivan kisses the beautiful girl and harmony is restored to the kingdom. In the complex aesthetic field of late Soviet cinema, an adaptation of the Strugatskys’ science fiction into the unlikely genre of the musical rom-com could also do much more: *The Magicians* managed to hitch elements of satirical fantasy and utopian fairytale to a precocious celebration of a magically different future.

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