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# [Introduction to] Apocalyptic Realism: The Science Fiction of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky

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# Apocalyptic Realism

## The Science Fiction of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky

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# Introduction

The epigraph to the last published piece of fiction Arkady and Boris Strugatsky wrote together is a quote from the Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa:

> *To call a despot a despot*
> *has always been dangerous.*
> *But in our times*
> *To call a slave a slave*
> *is equally dangerous.*

A cast of characters follows. The work is a play, and the cast consists of a middle-aged professor and his wife, their two grown sons, and a few of their friends and neighbors. There is also "A Figure in Black." Otherwise, there is no hint of anything out of the ordinary in the opening scene:

> A room doubling as living room and office in the apartment of Professor Kirsanov. Center back–two large windows with closed shutters. Between them stands an antique desk-bureau with numerous drawers. On top of the desk is an open typewriter, stacks of paper, folders, several large dictionaries, a mess.
>
> In the middle of the room, center stage–an oval table covered with a tablecloth, electric samovar, tea cups, sugar bowl, a bowl filled with cookies. On the left, with its side to the audience, stands a large color television. Having tea while watching the Soviet Congress of Deputies in session are . . . :
>
> KIRSANOV: That jerk butt in again! I can't stand him . . .
> BAZARIN: Could be worse. Zoya Sergeevna, just a drop more tea, if you would . . .
> ZOYA SERGEEVNA: *(pouring tea)* Do you want it strong?
> BAZARIN: No, no, not too strong, it s already nighttime . . .
> KIRSANOV: *(with disgust)* I mean *really,* what an obnoxious mug! In Portugal or somewhere, on the basis of that ugly mug alone the guy would never get elected into Parliament! (92-93)[1]

Presently a mysterious figure in black appears in the doorway. Although he explains his unwelcome penetration into the apartment–"your bell doesn't work and the door was half-

open"– it is clear that he can and will get into any apartment he needs to, at any time of night. After perusing Kirsanov's passport, he hands him an official-looking paper, asks him to sign a receipt, and disappears. The document is addressed to "Rich People of the City of Peter! All rich people in the city of Peter and its environs must appear today, the twelfth of January, by eight a.m., on the square in front of . . ." The place, what to bring, and what to leave behind are designated. In a few minutes Pinsky, the Kirsanov's upstairs neighbor and dear family friend, shows up in his robe and slippers with a similar document in hand, this one addressed to "Yids of the City of Peter! . . ." The derogatory address to the Jews erases any ambiguity about the nature of the summons, and both the "rich" Kirsanov and the Jew Pinsky fight back a growing sense of helplessness.

Thus begins the Strugatskys' play *Yids of the City of Peter, or Gloomy Discussions by Candlelight,* written and published in 1990. During the 1991 spring season, it was being performed on a regular basis in the theaters of Leningrad, the city known to its inhabitants as St. Petersburg, Peter's city, or, simply, *"Piter."* At first glance the play seems to be something new and anomalous to the rest of the Strugatskys' work. Did the authors get carried away by the imperative of glasnost, and abandon literature of the fantastic for barely disguised journalism?

On the contrary, for all its topical, surface realism, the play is entirely typical of the Strugatskys' brand of fantastic literature. The play's fast-paced, suspenseful plot is based on conventions of "cheap" detective and science fiction literature, but it is grounded in the realm of serious literature by weighty philosophical diatribes delivered by the main characters. At their best, as in *City of Peter,* the Strugatskys integrate the light and the weighty, the mundane and the metaphysical, without reconciling the ambiguity between different poles. All of the characteristic features of the Strugatskys' mature writing are present in this play. The epigraph is chosen from Arkady Strugatsky's favorite Japanese author, and, more importantly, it succinctly conveys the Strugatskys' most consistent sociopolitical theme. Character and dialog (whether or not they ostensibly belong to a future and/or alien time and place) mimic the norm for contemporary Soviet urban intellectuals with such felicity, that one

is often correct in assuming that a real-life prototype exists among the authors' acquaintances. Furthermore, the specific details of the setting belong unmistakably to the authors' contemporary milieu. "Zero-transport cabins" and other superficial sci-fi gadgetry in the early novels notwithstanding, the Strugatskys' material world almost always reflects contemporary Soviet standards, e.g., the professor has a manual typewriter in a portable case, not a computer. Likewise, every Russian reader can picture the bowl and the tasteless store-bought cookies in it: both are churned out in uniform size and color by a centrally-planned economy. Yet it is precisely this drab reality that generates a second, metaphysical reality: beyond his probable identity as a KGB agent, the figure in black also has the aura of Mozart's Black Visitor from Pushkin's drama *Mozart and Salieri.*

One of the truisms of science fiction genre studies is that in science fiction, reality is "made strange" in light of a single fantastic premise. Darko Suvin defined science fiction as a genre which "takes off from a fictional ("literary") hypothesis and develops it with totalizing ("scientific") rigor."[2] The Strugatskys' work conforms to this definition, but with a twist. Their depiction of ordinary Soviet reality is indeed "made strange" by a single extraordinary premise. The play's fantastic premise, which casts a shadow of the supernatural over everyday scenes, is that in the year of 1990, at the height of Gorbachev's glasnost reforms, the country could suddenly revert to the dark ages of terror, pogroms, and totalitarianism. In this instance, though, the vector between life and literary hypothesis reversed its direction. On August 19, 1991, four months after the *City of Peter* was published, an unsuccessful coup by communist hardliners turned the Strugatskys' "fantastic" literary hypothesis into an averted political reality. For a Russian writer, it has perhaps always been more gratifying to see life *avert* art, rather than life imitate art. In the following study of the Strugatskys' work, I will try to establish the patterns of interplay between the Strugatskys' depictions of Soviet reality and the "fantastic premises" they have derived from the heritage of Russian literature and culture as a whole.

This book is not a systematic overview of the Strugatskys' career or a general interpretation of the Strugatskys' place in world science fiction. Rather, I approach the Strugatskys' work from within the history and evolution of mainstream Russian literature, and seek to define the Strugatskys' place in the context of already established, native Russian literary and cultural traditions. One of the side benefits of this approach is that it sheds some light on the nature of the Strugatskys' reception in the West. It is striking that the Soviet Union's most popular science fiction writers have not enjoyed the success of, for instance, Poland's Stanislaw Lem in the Anglo-American market. The problem of (some) inadequate English translations aside, the surprisingly modest success the Strugatskys' work has encountered in the West may have to do in part with readers' general lack of familiarity with the profoundly Russian questions addressed in the Strugatskys' use of an ostensibly international genre.

More importantly, I hope to fill a large gap in existing criticism (both Soviet and Western), which has tended to concentrate only on the allegorical possibilities of science fiction. It has been tempting to ignore *how* the Strugatskys write, in order to concentrate on their *message,* which is presumably more earth-bound and politically current than their intergalactic settings might lead a disapproving censor to believe. To vindicate this point, critics have often sought to extract and isolate a social, political, or ethical stance out of the Strugatskys' work, as if to prove that *this* science fiction is not simply escapist entertainment. The best pieces of this type of criticism have succeeded precisely in establishing the Strugatskys' reputation as writers who are primarily concerned with serious philosophical, social, and ethical questions.

On the other hand, the Strugatskys' enduring popularity is assumed to be part and parcel of the genre they write in—science fiction is an inherently "popular" genre, and the Strugatskys "happen" to be extremely talented practitioners. Science fiction, like the two other popular genre forms with which it often intermingles—the detective or crime novel and the adventure/historical novel—belongs to the realm of popular literature insofar as it typically provides exotic characters

and/or settings and a suspenseful plot within the context of an established set of conventions. Familiar science fiction conventions include the confrontation between human and alien life forms, the conflict between human values and technological progress, the juxtaposition of past and future societies, and so forth. Any serious departure from the genre's familiar, formulaic underlying premises constitutes a perceived departure from the genre altogether, and usually entails confusion among readers.[3] In other words, it is taken for granted that the Strugatskys' science fiction is accessible and entertaining in a way that ponderous mainstream realism and sophisticated avant-garde experimentation is not. As such, however, it seems to hardly merit serious critical attention at all–the common, and often deserved fate of popular literary subgenres both in the East and in the West. A Russian critic speculated that the surprising lack of Strugatsky criticism, even after three decades of unabated popularity, is due precisely to the inherent lack of esteem accorded to the science fiction genre:

> What is at issue here? Perhaps the conviction that has formed among critics . . . that the fantastic [science fiction] is about something exotic and detached from real life, unrelated to the problems of contemporary life? Once this is so, then it does not deserve to be a topic of conversation among serious people. . . .[4]

Clearly, some of the critical confusion–resulting for the most part in silence–has been perpetuated by the unresolved incongruity between the Strugatskys as writers in a popular, "mass" genre and, on another level, as spokesmen for at least one whole generation of Soviet intellectuals. Mikhail Lemkhin inadvertently poses the question this study sets out to answer when he writes:

> I'm afraid that I cannot explain why, but it is certain that for me these three tales–*Hard to Be a God, Roadside Picnic,* and *One Billion Years Until the End of the World*–are not only landmarks in my life, but representative of whole chunks of my life which were lived under the constellation of these tales. And I know for certain that I am not the only such reader.
>
> The question of [their] popularity is a separate, special topic. Here I address a different topic: why and how the questions which concerned the Strugatskys were not only their own questions. The Strugatskys' evolution, their sense of where and how they exist in the world–follows

> a path fairly typical for a large part of the intelligentsia, in particular for the scientific intelligentsia. Without a doubt it is because of this fact that the Strugatskys are among our most widely-read authors. . . . [5]

In order to define the nature of the relationship between the Strugatskys' use of popular genre forms and their importance as "serious writers" for the intelligentsia, I explore two questions in this book:

- What techniques do the authors develop to encode an open-ended philosophical discussion or sociopolitical debate into the formulaic structures of science fiction, detective, and adventure story literature?
- How are the conventional plots, characters, and settings of the popular genres shaped into modern myths for the intelligentsia to live by,"under the constellation of these tales"?

## The Early Publications

The Strugatskys made their debut with the 1958 short story *Izvne* (From Without), followed by several science fiction and space adventure novellas and short stories.[6] The novel *Hard to Be a God* (1964) is the first decisive landmark in the development of the Strugatskys' work. All of the novels and short stories prior to 1964 can be considered to belong to their early phase. In this phase, the answer to "the question which always interested us . . . where are we going . . . after the XX Party Congress?" seems to be already evident: the road to the "radiant communist future," temporarily detoured by Stalinism, once again lies ahead. The first short story, "From Without" (1958), takes place in the abstract present; subsequently, temporal and spacial horizons expand into the future and onto other planets and solar systems, until, by the mid-twenty-second century depicted in *Noon: 22nd Century* (1962) utopian communism reigns on Earth. The hallmark of the Strugatskys' idyllic future world is that it combines both poles of traditional Russian utopian thought: the vision of pastoral happiness, in simple harmony with nature, is implicit in the depiction of green garden-cities, and in the child-like curiosity, rather than Faustian pride, of the stories' scientist-heroes. On the other

hand, the utopian dream of artificially created abundance and the omnipotence of human technology is also realized in the Strugatskys' twenty-second century. Hardy hybrid cattle whose flesh is as white and delicate as crab meat, non-polluting, instantaneous methods of transportation, and the characters' fleeting worries over what to do with an excess of time and luxury are the specific traits of this vision.

Although the main dramatic conflict in the early novels and stories is "between the good and the better," the authors succeed in populating their future world with refreshingly quirky and humorous characters. Furthermore, even in the earliest utopian future history, setting and dialog retain the immediacy and mimetic power of contemporary realistic prose.[7] The novels and short stories of this phase of the Strugatskys' writing have little relevance to the main topics treated in this study. They are essentially one-dimensional, extrapolatory works of science fiction which reflect the general optimistic ethos of the "thaw" generation. Total harmony between social utopia and unabated scientific progress is threatened for the first time in *Far Rainbow* (1963), which is set sometime in the twenty-third century. A series of physics experiments conducted in the idyllic scientific research colony on the planet Rainbow creates a tidal wave of matter/energy which the scientists cannot control. Most of the planet is evacuated, but the scientists who must remain await death by the unstoppable black wave with quiet heroism and a clear conscience.

About half of the works written in the sixties belong to a loosely connected future history series. A few stock characters and futuristic gadgets (e.g., instantaneous transport boothes) reappear over and over again. The basic premise of the earliest future history cycle remains the same: some kind of international world communism (no longer necessarily idyllic) reigns on Earth, and the stars and planets in our galaxy, as well as those of the "Periphery" (beyond our galaxy) are being actively explored and/or colonized. Another key feature which unites all the future history novels is the concept of "progressorism." "Progressors" are missionaries from Earth, who, armed with humanity's twenty-first century wisdom and technology, attempt to help less developed societies on other planets. All of the

novels included in the loosely connected future history cycle share the theme of progressorism, and most of them are structured as parables: the Progressor plot creates a model in which the distance between more and less socially, politically, and ecologically advanced societies is simply projected into interplanetary space.

The 1964 novel *Hard to Be a God* marks a turning point in the future history cycle, and in the Strugatskys' development as novelists. To this day, *Hard to Be a God* ranks as one of the most popular works of science fiction ever to be published in the Soviet Union. In it, Progressors from the nearly utopian twenty-first century planet Earth expect to guide the feudal society of the planet Ankara along the path of historical progress. The Earthling hero is perfectly disguised as a native nobleman, outwardly adapting to the Ankaran life (a mixture of medieval Europe and medieval Japan) in every detail, including a native girlfriend. However, instead of following its projected historical path of slow linear progress, the society of Ankara veers off toward a fascist dictatorship, buttressed by an ignorant and vulgar populace, and including specific features of Stalinism (identified by Darko Suvin as the "doctor's plot," stage-managed confessions, recasting of history to exalt the present ruler).[8] The Earthling "gods," powerful as they are in theory, cannot undo Ankara's poverty and violence without forceful intrusion. Since sparking a revolution and imposing a new dictatorship of any kind runs contrary to the Earthlings' humanistic principles, they are powerless to act. The hero is faced with an acute ethical dilemma when the principle of noninterference prevents him from acting, even when events lead to the killing of the planet's leading intelligentsia and the Ankaran girl he loves. For the first time in the Strugatskys' fiction, the path of history and the path of ethical ideals obviously diverge. In other words, the ethical and spiritual realm of human existence is suddenly at odds with the sociopolitical realm. From now on, what is "rendered unto Caesar" and what is "rendered unto God" stand in stark opposition.

Later future history novels and the independent works written in the late sixties, seventies, and eighties paint an increasingly pessimistic picture of ethical and moral stagnation, where

the so-called vertical progress of history seems more like an absurd whirlpool funneling into an apocalyptic abyss. Without distinguishing between a middle and a late phase, we can simply refer to these novels as the "mature" works. A division between middle and late works cannot be made chronologically, since most of the "late" works that were not published until the liberal policy of glasnost took effect were actually written in the early 1970s.

*The Inhabited Island* (1969), *The Beetle in the Anthill* (1979), and *The Waves Still the Wind* (1985) form a trilogy which culminates the entire future history ("Progressorism") series. As Patrick McGuire has pointed out in his political analysis of the future history cycle, the face of international communism on Earth changes radically by the end of the series. In the final two novels, Maxim Kammerer, the former Progressor hero of *The Inhabited Island,* now works for the "Department of Extraordinary Events" under the auspices of the powerful Committee on Control. The combined acronyms of the two departments form an anagram for the notorious "Cheka," Stalin's secret police and forerunner of the KGB. In general,

> *Beetle* negates or contradicts much of the spirit of the works that came before it. COMCON . . . is nothing less than an organ of state coercion, and at that, one staffed by former covert operatives accustomed to working outside the law.
>
> Further, we are suddenly made aware of a mania for secrecy in the Strugatsky future society, though it faces no external threat save conceivably the super-advanced [alien] Wanderers. The only object of this secrecy can be to keep information out of the hands of the public– a public that has [supposedly] enjoyed full communism for two-and-a-half centuries![9]

Finally, in *The Waves Still the Wind,* the unifying plot motif of progressorism reaches a dead-end. By the year 2299, not only does Earth society apparently reject its former heroes, but the ex-Progressors themselves renounce their former calling:

> "Good is good!" Asya insisted.
>
> "You know perfectly well that that's not true. Or, maybe you really don't know? Even though I've explained [it] to you before. I was a Progressor for only three years, I brought good, only good, nothing but good, and Lord, how they hated me! It's fully understandable from their point of view. Because when the gods came, they came without

> asking permission. Nobody invited them, but they came anyway and started to do good. That same good, which is always good. . . ."[10]

Within the philosophical context underlying the novels' construction (discussed in chapter 2), it is clear that the rejection of the notion that "good is always good" leads towards an exploration of the heterodoxical notion that evil, in the words of Goethe's Mephistopheles, is "that power which always wills evil, but eternally works good." Furthermore, it is clear that in the 22 years that have elapsed between the composition of *Hard to Be a God* and *The Waves Still the Wind,* the style and structure of the genre have undergone their own evolution. Despite its suggestive title, *Hard to Be a God* has no religious subtext. It 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 to be discussed in the following chapters.

## The Late Publications

In order to facilitate discussion of the Strugatskys late and untranslated novels, the somewhat convoluted history of their publication should be elucidated. The tug-of-war between hardline conservative critics and liberal supporters (some of whom subsequently emigrated to Israel, confirming the conservatives' worst suspicions) over the Strugatskys' writing in the late sixties resulted in an uneasy truce, which lasted until the advent of glasnost in 1986. For a period of about eighteen years, some of the Strugatskys' works were published in numbers falling far short of the demand, and the rest of their work was not published at all. Although *The Ugly Swans* caused a scandal in 1972 when an unauthorized Russian edition and translation appeared in the West, few people knew that it was only one half

of a larger novel the Strugatskys were working on called *A Lame Fate* (completed in 1984, published in 1986). *A Lame Fate* tells the partly autobiographical (on the basis of Arkady Strugatskys' reminiscences), partly fantastic story of a Soviet writer who does justice to his innermost convictions and conscience only in the unpublishable tale he writes "for the drawer": the text of *The Ugly Swans.* The common theme which ties the two parts together is the theme of Apocalypse. In different settings, both the frame story and the narrator's tale show how the structure and values of the present civilization have been discredited, but the face of the new civilization which prepares to rise in its place seems, for better or for worse, fundamentally alien.

The biggest surprise was the appearance of the novel *The Doomed City* in 1989 in the journal *Yunost.* The novel appeared to have been written on the crest of the new wave of glasnost and perestroika: it depicts animosity (in a "classless" society!) between rural and urban workers, bureaucrats, and the ruling elite; it depicts the growing hostility, in times of crisis, between different racial and ethnic groups; it depicts a catastrophic decline in cultural and linguistic norms; it depicts a successful coup by a fascist coalition which bases its authority over the multi-national city on the hypothetical presence of a hostile Anti-City. A statue reminiscent of both Peter the Great and Lenin at Finland Station stands confused at a crossroads in hell. A Chinese dissident blows himself up in a suicidal act of protest against the totalitarian regime. In the spring of 1989, none of these scenes seemed coincidental. Therefore, the impact of the outermost frame of the novel is considerable: the authors included the dates of the novel's composition as a *coda* to the story proper: *written in 1970-1972, 1975.*

The Strugatskys' latest full-length novel, *Burdened with Evil, or Forty Years Later,* was published in the journal *Yunost* in 1988. The structural and philosophical complexity of the novel does not lend itself to easy paraphrasing. In essence, the novel is the story of three Christs: the historical Jesus, his modern equivalent in the person of an enlightened and dedicated high school teacher, and the Demiurge, who embodies a gnostic interpretation of The Savior. The story is told from the point of view of the future, "forty years after" the end of the 20th century. The

protagonist, a disciple of the teacher, interpolates his hagiography with chapters from a mysterious manuscript authored by the Demiurge's secretary during the time of the Demiurge's activity in the provincial Soviet town of Tashlinsk. The manuscript within the novel is spiced with noncanonical versions of Islamic history, Jewish history, as well as Stalinist history. The contemporary layers of the novel also depict modern-day leaders and disciples, in the guise of Soviet youth cults (Soviet hippies and punks).

According to the exhaustive bibliographical index prepared by an independent group of Strugatsky fans, excerpts and variants of *A Lame Fate* and *The Doomed City* appeared in regional journals before the novels were published as a whole in the leading "thick" journals. Furthermore, both *Burdened with Evil* and the two previously unpublished novels were immediately reprinted in full, in book form, by both State presses and by small cooperative publishing enterprises. A multi-volume edition of the Strugatskys' collected works is currently being prepared for publication by the private publishing firm Tekst.