

2007

## Fiziki-Liriki (Scientist-Poets)

Yvonne Howell

University of Richmond, [yhowell@richmond.edu](mailto:yhowell@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/mlc-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Russian Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Howell, Yvonne. "Fiziki-Liriki (Scientist-Poets)." *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Russian Culture*. Edited by Tatiana Smorodinskaya, Karen Evans-Romaine, and Helena Gosילו. New York: Routledge, 2007.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

### **fiziki-liriki (scientist-poets)**

*Fiziki-liriki* refers to a 1959 poem by Boris Slutskii that crystallized in memorable shorthand the intellectual divide between what he called ‘physicists’ and ‘lyricists’. In the West, this divide had been articulated in C.P. Snow’s influential Rede lecture ‘The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution’ (1959), in which he suggested that the specialized discourse and worldview of the hard sciences is no longer understandable to humanists. In Russia, the hard sciences in general, but physics in particular, enjoyed a spectacular ascendancy in the years following the launch of the first sputnik (1957). Young people earnestly debated the relationship between the brave new world of science and the so-called

lyrical worldview of the arts and humanities. In retrospect, the debate between ‘physicists’ and ‘lyricists’ evidenced not a divide, but the existence of a consensual, collective romanticism about the future world, one in which the spectacular successes of contemporary sciences and the emotional beauty embodied in the humanities would finally be integrated. This worldview infused the popular genres of Soviet science fiction, bard songs, and films with physicist protagonists. The ideal student and future professional of this era was an intrepid scientist, a passionate explorer of new frontiers of knowledge, but also an amateur poet, more often than not with a guitar slung over his shoulder and a classic of world literature in his backpack. Post-Soviet realities imply that, as in the West, the original premise of the debate – that scientists and humanists might speak the same language – will dissolve in the wake of relentless technical advancements and specialization in the hard sciences and the prestige of the social sciences over traditional humanities. However, Slutskii’s poem and the cultural moment it defined still serve as a symbolic signpost in the landscape of post-Soviet nostalgia.

**See also:** bards; science and technology; science fiction; Slutskii, Boris; Strugatskii, Arkadii and Boris

YVONNE HOWELL