

## BRAVE NEW WORLDS

by John Glad

The next time you are in an American bookstore, take a look at the science-fiction section; in some stores, it is almost as big as all of the other fiction categories put together. Walk into a Soviet bookstore these days, and you'll find . . . probably no science fiction at all. Go to a Soviet secondhand bookshop, and your chances of finding science fiction there will be equally slim. But take a stroll past the Moscow Art Theater to where Pushkin Street intersects Kuznetskii Most, and you'll find what you're looking for—though not in a store.

The action is out in the street, where middle-aged men in old-fashioned caps gather in small groups with housewives and bright-eyed teenagers. A man of perhaps 35, wearing a mouse gray jacket, asks you in a low voice if you are a fan of Boris Leonidovich. He has a furtive look about him, and you stare at him in silence for a few seconds before you realize that he is referring to Pasternak. No, you say, you're interested in science fiction. "Aha," he responds, "Sasha's got a few things."

Sasha, it turns out, has volume 14 of a multi-volume anthology of science fiction. The back page says it was published in 1967 in an edition of 215,000 copies, and the list price is 93 kopecks. Sasha will let you have it for only 35 rubles—almost 40 times the official price. Aside from that, he has two well-thumbed issues of the magazine *Baikal*, each containing half of an anti-utopian novel—*The Snail on the Slope*—by Boris and Arkadii Strugatskii.

Anti-utopian fiction has not always received a warm welcome in the Soviet Union, though even the most conservative literary critics recognize that historical forces make some such literature inevitable. (As reviewers E. Brandis and D. Dmitrevskii once observed, "Vicious, slanderous, fantastic novels aimed against Marxism and the socialist state become more and more widespread as the crisis and decay of world capitalism increase.") The editors of *Baikal* were fired in 1968 for publishing the Strugatskii story, and copies of the offending issues were removed from libraries. For the two issues, Sasha wants 140 rubles, the average worker's salary for a month. And he will get it.

To say that science fiction—*nauchnaia fantastika*, or science fantasy, as it is known—is popular in the Soviet Union is an understatement. It is so popular that bookstores could not keep

**И. ЕФРЕМОВ**

*Title page of Ivan Efremov's short story, "Serpent's Heart." More than Sputnik, Efremov's work during the 1950s helped to revive Soviet science fiction. It also sparked debate over what was permissible.*

"sci-fi" novels in stock even back in the good old days—over a decade ago—when large quantities of science fiction were still being put out by Molodaia Guardiia, Znanie, Mir, and other publishing houses; and this despite the fact that pressruns of popular literature in the Soviet Union are typically much larger than they are in the United States. (The number of titles appearing in any one year, on the other hand, is considerably smaller.) Today, for reasons I will come to, almost no new science fiction is seeing print in the USSR. Yet the Soviet black market in science fiction, as with so many other consumer goods, is thriving.

The popularity of science fiction is not confined to some privileged "elite." A survey conducted in 1966 revealed that while 38 percent of science-fiction readers had completed higher education, 58 percent had at most a secondary education. While 39 percent of the readership was under age 20, 41 percent was over 30. Sci-fi was for a while a major part of the literary diet of an estimated one-quarter of the USSR's population—a higher proportion than that found in Britain, Japan, or the United States, the three other major consumers (and producers) of science fiction. And science fiction has apparently been quite influential in the Soviet Union. One study during the mid-1960s found that 40 percent of young physicists, astronomers, and astrophysicists first considered taking up their specialties after reading Ivan Efremov's *The Andromeda Nebula* (1957).

What accounts for the appeal of *nauchnaia fantastika*? To

---

begin with, reading per se is popular in the Soviet Union, there being few other ways to amuse oneself. (Until recently, books were also very cheap—the one item any Soviet citizen could actually afford to “collect.”) Science fiction has little competition from other types of “drugstore” pulp fiction: Louis L’Amour, John Jakes, Trevanian, and Barbara Cartland have no real counterparts in the USSR. Readers embrace sci-fi because much of it is devoid of the “socialist realism” that has enjoyed so long a reign in the Soviet Union. For their part, writers gravitate—or once did—toward science fiction because the shift to a different time period or planet allows them greater latitude politically. The usual official prescriptions about “depicting Soviet reality” are more easily ignored in the (at first glance) otherworldly setting. This “forbidden fruit” aspect, of course, has its dangers.

#### Urging on the Future

And not every author has been tempted. The writers of science fiction in the USSR have always been a varied lot—like their audience. There was Count Aleksei Tolstoi, a rich boy and distant relative of Leo Tolstoi. He emigrated from Russia after the 1917 Revolution but discovered that royalties were bigger back home and returned. There was Aleksandr Beliaev, a cripple who wrote gothic adventures from his bed. There were and are unrepentant Stalinists like Sergei Ivanov, still around to level critical blasts at “liberals” and other anti-regime types (whose names I prudently omit out of concern for their health). There are former liberals who have discovered that the pickings are richer in the official Writers’ Union circle. (I won’t name them either; who am I to disparage people who are simply trying to get through life by making “small accommodations”?)

I suspect also that science fiction appeals to some quality in the Russian soul. I say this because science fiction and its relatives have long been popular in Russia. Certain characteristics of Soviet society—its materialism, its glorification of technology—may enhance the attraction of science fiction, but the genre,

---

*John Glad, 41, a former secretary of the Wilson Center’s Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, is a professor of Slavic languages and literatures at the University of Maryland. Born in Gary, Indiana, he received his B.A. from Indiana University (1962) and his Ph.D. from New York University (1970). He is the author of *Extrapolations from Dystopia: A Critical Study of Soviet Science Fiction* (1982) and the translator of *Kolyma Tales by Varlam Shalamov* (vol. I, 1980, vol. II, 1981), which was nominated for an American Book Award.*

or something like it, could be found in *Russian* society two centuries ago. In 1784, Prince Mikhail Shcherbatov wrote his *Voyage to the Land of Ofir*, wherein a shipwrecked Swedish nobleman discovers a somewhat technologically advanced, Rousseauesque society ruled by a benevolent monarch. Then, as now, the censor was no pushover, and the book was not actually published until 1896.

The Russians did not invent the utopian fantasy. Indeed, utopian tales appeared in Russia belatedly—in Shcherbatov's case, 268 years after Thomas More's *Utopia* was published in London and 85 years after François Fénelon's *Aventures de Télémaque, fils d'Ulysse* first appeared in Paris. Even so, the Russians quickly embraced the genre. In official eyes, it is today the most honored form of science fiction, the duty of the communist writer being, as critic Aleksandr Kazantsev put it in 1979, to "urge the people into the future which we are creating."

In 1830, Faddei Bulgarin published his *Believable Fantasies in the Twenty-Ninth Century*. In the novel, the narrator drowns but is entwined in a precious grass, *radix vitalis*, which revives him 1,000 years later. The future world is one of wealth, steam carriages, and submarines. Technology is not an unalloyed blessing, however. As Bulgarin writes, "Each woman carried on her left hand a leather shield covered with impenetrable lacquer to guard herself against immodest [male] eyes armed with telescopic lenses which were quite fashionable."

### Retreat from Utopia

Telescopic lenses have not yet come to pass, but one feature of Prince Vladimir Fedorovich Odoevskii's *The Year 4338* (1840), another utopian novel, has. In that tale, people address each other as "comrade." Odoevskii's work, like Shcherbatov's, was a victim of tsarist censorship and circulated in handwritten manuscript form only, anticipating the underground *samizdat* literature of today's Soviet Union. The same was the case with Nikolai Chernyshevskii's revolutionary fantasy *What Is to Be Done?*, which greatly influenced young V. I. Lenin.

The optimistic tenor of Russian science fiction persisted through the 19th century. But in the decade prior to World War I, as if to herald the impending cataclysm of war and revolution, Russian writers took the lead in establishing the *anti-utopian* novel, or dystopia, as a distinct genre. It had been Leo Tolstoi, after all, who noted that while happy families were all alike, unhappy families were unhappy in different ways. The same held true, writers came to realize, for societies. In science fiction,

---

there was a certain sameness to utopias: Technology is triumphant, the social order humane, and all too often, as Aleksandr Beliaev observed during the 1930s, the characters run around in "clothing that reminds one of ancient Greek togas and tunics." Dystopias, by contrast, offered more variety.

One of the earliest examples of an anti-utopia was Valerii Briusov's *Republic of the Southern Cross* (1907). Briusov describes an industrial society created under glass at the South Pole. All of the people's needs—medicine, food, shelter—are provided by the government so that there is no need for money. Every aspect of the nation's life is regimented, clothing and architecture are monotonous, and meals are taken simultaneously. It is an utterly functional, utterly rational society. Eventually, however, the Republic is shaken by a strange disease—*mania contradicens*. People begin to do and say precisely the opposite of what they intend. The epidemic spreads rapidly. Murder, cannibalism, and violence of all sorts are rampant.

Briusov states that it is up to the historians to determine to what degree the structure of the state was responsible for the Republic's demise, but the message is clear. For obvious reasons, this work leaves modern Soviet critics cold.

### Foiling Capitalists

The 1917 October Revolution marked the beginning of what would become a curious boom/bust cycle in the production of science fiction in the USSR: periods of intense creativity interrupted by stretches of enforced inactivity. Thus, little was published during the first years of the Soviet state, as the nation contended with famine and civil war. By the early 1920s, however, the situation began to improve. In 1922, Evgenii Zamiatin wrote *We*, an anti-utopian vision of a meticulously organized society where even one's personal affairs are subject to the will of the Benefactor. The doomed rebels against this system take as their symbol the square root of -1: an imaginary number that mocks the Benefactor's rationalism. Widely translated abroad, *We* influenced both George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. But Zamiatin himself was exiled from the USSR, and his book is available there today only in contraband editions.

In some respects, the period after the Revolution resembled the period just before it. Along with the dystopias, there reappeared the adventure fantasies, Aleksei Tolstoi's best-selling *Aelita* (1924) being but one of many. Foreign works were also popular: Between 1923 and 1930, some 100 science-fiction books by Western writers were translated and published in the Soviet

### A CAROUSEL OF WORTHLESS GOODS

*The world as it looks—officially—to Moscow has always been reflected in the work of some Russian science-fiction writers. Life in the decadent West is a favorite target. In their story "This Unstable World" from the magazine Fantastika (1966), B. Zubkov and E. Muslin satirize American consumerism and "planned obsolescence." An excerpt:*

Swaying and moaning from his ordeal, Price emerged from the subway. Half-naked, he crawled to the nearest clothing automat, dropped in his money and put his feet, arms, and neck into the openings. The automat slapped on one-day shoes, glued on a single-wear collar, stuck on missing buttons, patched his torn clothes with a short-lived plaster, and shoved at him a stylish "Dispose-Hat." . . . The metallic wonder boys turned out flimsy goods, "things for a day," all unreliable, like rope made of dough, and short-lived as ice on a sizzling grill. They were no different than a handful of smoke or dust. Here you could buy books, printed with disappearing ink so that after a week all the pages were blank, or newspapers that turned black so quickly that hourly editions had to be printed. Or perhaps you would like a thin, easy-to-melt skillet or a pillow which soon felt like concrete, or a self-clogging faucet or some perfume which turned to skunk spray after a week. Rusty metal nails or paper televisions . . . Their low cost did not compensate for their awful workmanship, and low prices ruined the consumer. The carousel of worthless goods spun faster and faster, emptying the pockets and the soul.

Price put his last coin into a slot on a yellow post. Part of the sidewalk sprang open, and up came a small bench for a brief rest. After his recent exertions, Price thought he deserved such a luxury. Just then a tiny dog stopped beside the yellow post . . . The dog bared his teeth, causing Price to leap backwards. Stray dogs were murderous! Following the Universal Trade Theory, the company Pomeranians-Dachshunds Limited supplied old ladies with dogs as companions. Since the dogs turned rabid after three weeks, the owners would turn them loose on the street before their guarantee period expired.

Price suddenly plummeted downward—the short rest-bench he had been sitting on had collapsed and withdrawn into the sidewalk.

—translated by John Glad

Union, volumes by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells heading the list. (Wells, who was married to a Russian, once outraged a gathering of Soviet writers when, at a dinner in his honor at the Petrograd House of the Arts, he thanked his hosts for having allowed him to observe their "curious historical experiment.") Inevitably, though, the ascendancy of Marxism-Leninism prompted the

---

emergence of whole new branches of science fiction—among them, the *roman o katastrofe* and the *krasnyi detektiv* novel.

*Iprit* (1925), by Viktor Shklovskii and Vsevolod Ivanov, is an example of the latter, the “red detective” genre, in which a common man, against all odds, foils the machinations of the evil capitalists. A Russian sailor who has fled the USSR is shipwrecked in England and mistaken for Tarzan by a millionaire’s daughter. The girl’s father has invented a chemical—Iprit—with which he hopes to create a poisonous, 100-kilometer-wide belt around the USSR to stop the revolution from spreading. He has another chemical that eliminates the need for sleep and that will allow him to produce vast quantities of Iprit by working his minions in London around the clock. The sailor, of course, leads the fight against the millionaire and wins by attacking London with sleeping gas.

Related to the red detective stories are the so-called catastrophe novels, in which the struggle for possession of some scientific invention causes a major disaster—usually in the degenerate West, where such horrors are to be expected—which in turn destroys the global balance of power and usually (but not always) brings about world revolution.

The second half of the 1920s also saw the appearance of Aleksandr Beliaev, whose writings, heavily influenced by Jules Verne, remain especially popular among younger readers. Instead of positing futuristic technological breakthroughs—time machines, space stations, and so on—Beliaev preferred tinkering with human biology. He created characters who could breathe under water (*The Amphibian Man*), fly (*Ariel*), shrink to microscopic size (*The Marvelous Eye*), or use the powers of the brain to control people and objects at a distance (*Ruler of the World*). In *Professor Dowell’s Head*, he explored the implications of head transplants, inspiring one team of Soviet surgeons during the late 1930s to attempt transplants of dogs’ heads.

Science fiction vanished from the shelves once more during the early 1930s: Stalin’s austere First Five Year Plan (1928–33) aimed at providing steel, not books. When sci-fi reemerged later in the decade, the writing was guarded. In the un-utopian conditions of Stalinist Russia, utopian themes virtually disappeared from science fiction. The future—technologically and socially—was treated only in terms of the next few years, since making a “wrong” prediction could be dangerous. With the onset of World War II, science fiction again went underground.

Not until after the war did science fiction begin to regain some of the vigor it had displayed during the 1920s. The death of Stalin in 1953 provided more breathing room, and with the pub-



A satirical view of Soviet publishing, 1934. Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Dickens wait outside an editor's office with their manuscripts. Only the bureaucrat with an "official memorandum" gets in.

lication of Ivan Efremov's *The Andromeda Nebula* four years later, the "thaw" was underway in earnest. After a long winter of "safe" science fiction—children's books in which characters hitch rides on rockets, novels in which the hero builds an electric power plant underground—*The Andromeda Nebula* was received enthusiastically by the Soviet reading public as a refreshing treatment of long-forbidden subjects: the cosmic theme, social relationships, the technological accomplishments of the distant future.

Of course, Efremov's novel had its conservative critics. "Just what planet is being treated," asked one of them indignantly. "Is this really the Earth? After all, in the history of the planet that I. Efremov calls by this name no one has kept in his memory such events as The Great October Revolution, such names as Marx, Engels, Lenin." But the thaw survived such chill blasts, at least for a while. For the first time, authors of science fiction were admitted to the Writers' Union. Science-fiction clubs sprang up everywhere.

Humor and parody became a permanent feature of Soviet science fiction. The traditional melodramatic theme of the sinis-



ter invention run wild was lampooned, for example, in I. Varshavskii's *Delta Rhythm*. A scientist is keeping alive a fused brain mass taken from a group of cats. It is pointed out that brain cells in mammals are virtually identical and that man's intellectual superiority stems from the manner of organization of these cells. The large brain mass is several times the size of a man's, and its abilities in its new, restructured form are unknown. The scientist feels some force taking over his mind when he is in the immediate vicinity of the tank with the brain. He and his doctor decide that he should yield to the force to see what the results will be. He does so—and catches a mouse.

But among some Soviet writers, something deeper was going on, something Isaac Asimov had wondered about in a 1962 introduction to an anthology of translated Soviet science fiction. In the essay, he divided Anglo-American science fiction into three periods. The first, extending from 1926 to 1938, was marked by a predominance of adventure literature with a minimum of attention devoted to technology. The period running from 1938 to 1950 he classified as technology dominant: Plots continued to be adventurous, but technology was emphasized and plausibly described by authors with scientific training. Soviet science fiction more or less repeated this progression, although treatment of truly advanced technical themes was not achieved until the late 1950s. But Asimov noted that the third stage in Anglo-American science fiction—which he called “sociology dominant,” what we might call social criticism—was missing from the anthology. He wondered whether a stage-three tradition was possible to achieve in the USSR.



---

At that time, Soviet science fiction really was at a stage-two level of development, but was on the verge of breaking into stage three in a big way, albeit not for long.

In general, the 1960s brought a continued loosening of official control over science fiction. After Soviet writers had experimented with new technical themes, they began to test the limits of the new permissiveness by branching out into social criticism—subject matter that had long been derided as peculiarly Western, reflecting the ugly realities of capitalism. (The horrible creatures in H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* were not, it was argued, merely the creations of a talented surgeon but rather "sinister basic images which characterize modern capitalist society.") In the official view, Soviet society was by nature, and by way of contrast, optimistic. Yet during the mid-1960s, fewer and fewer writers of science fiction seemed to agree.

### Hard Times, Again

The criticisms were, of course, usually oblique—aimed at fictional societies of the future, or conditions on other planets or, conveniently, in "the West." There was little doubt in Soviet readers' minds, however, that the words on the page were often meant as a commentary on contemporary (and local) reality. Thus, in one story, people of a distant future contemplate whether the housing shortage on Earth will ever be solved. In another, human beings have finally achieved harmony—but at the price of being fused into a lump of limbless flesh, from which peer millions upon millions of passive, despairing eyes.

Works of satire were sometimes more explicit. In *After Rerecording*, by A. Sharov, a character who has been exiled to Siberia is aided by a former professor, who sends him scientific literature, publishes his articles anonymously, pays him the royalties, and eventually hopes to help him return to Moscow and take over his chair when he retires. The former pupil speeds things up by denouncing his benefactor for being connected with an "enemy of the people"—himself. The professor ends up in a concentration camp, and the former pupil gets his position.

By the late 1960s, two brothers, Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii, were writing even bolder tales purporting to describe fictitious future societies that could be recognized as, at best, caricatures of Soviet society. In *The Snail on the Slope*, the authors create a grotesquely inhuman world, ridden with greed, stupidity, and bureaucracy, in which the theme of flight is so predominant that even machines seek escape:

"Probably she [the machine] just couldn't stand it any

---

more. They shook her on the vibrostand, they tormented her with great self-concentration, they dug around in her inner parts, burned her thin nerves with soldering irons. She choked from the smell of rosin. They forced her to commit stupidities, they created her to commit stupidities, to commit more and more stupid stupidities. In the evening they would leave her, tormented, helpless, in the hot, dry room. Finally she made up her mind to escape, although she knew everything—the senselessness of flight and her own inevitable doom. . . . And now she has surely comprehended all that about which she earlier only guessed—that there is no freedom, that whether all doors are open or shut before you, everything is stupidity and chaos, and there is only loneliness.”

The “dissident” potential of such stories is hard to overlook. By the early 1970s, the authorities had tired of the “lack of positive conceptions” displayed in recent Soviet science fiction; they “drew the appropriate conclusions” and took matters in hand. The word went out. Science-fiction clubs were disbanded. Magazines cut back on the number of sci-fi stories they printed, while book publishers ignored science fiction almost entirely. Pessimistic, critical, or anti-utopian stories were denounced as “totally incompatible with the tasks set before Soviet literature.” Science fiction—once again—had fallen on hard times.

By 1982, the amount of original science fiction published in the Soviet Union every year was estimated to have been reduced to about 500 pages—leaving out translations, reprinted works, and technical scientific material. The writers and the critics have either gone on to other things or emigrated—just one more reflection of the general intellectual climate of the country as a whole. The black market in science fiction today is a black market in *secondhand* science fiction.

And tomorrow? Who knows? An easing of official restrictions? A revival of limited freedom of expression? Or just more of the same? “No one knows what will happen tomorrow,” says the jubilant narrator in Zamiatin’s *We*. “You understand? I don’t know, no one knows; it’s unknown!”

