

[1–2022]

history – theory – criticism

dějiny–teorie–kritika



# Obsah | Contents

Editorial 5

## 1. Studie a eseje | Studies and Essays

**STANISLAV HOLUBEC** – Introduction: Imagining the Future as a Culture of Defeat – Eastern and Central European Imagined Futures since 1945  
*Úvod: Představy o budoucnosti jako kultura porážky – východoevropské a středoevropské představy o budoucnosti od roku 1945* 9

**ANNA ELISABETH KEIM** – World Unity as the Only Future for Modernity: Localising the World State Idea and Its Proponents in (late) 1940s Germany  
*Světová jednota jako jediná budoucnost modernity: nalézání myšlenky světového státu a jejich zastánců v Německu (konce) 40. let 20. století* 17

**LEJLA VESKOVIĆ** – Two Futures Imagined in the Post-socialist Yugoslosphere  
*Dvě představy budoucnosti v postsocialistické jugosféře* 45

**ANASTASIA MITROFANOVA** – The Future Seen from the Edge of Society: Contemporary Russophone Communist Sci-Fi  
*Budoucnost nablížená z okraje společnosti: současná ruskojazyčná komunistická sci-fi* 75

**ENIS SULSTAROVA** – The Future of a Stalinist State: Albanian Science Fiction Literature during Communism  
*Budoucnost staliniistického státu: albánská vědeckofantastická literatura za komunismu* 91

## 2. Diskuse a rozepře | Discussions and Disputes

**PETR WOHLMUTH** – “You have to do it with love... Oral history was something I was never paid for...” An Interview with Professor Alessandro Portelli (Sapienza Università di Roma)  
*„Musíte to dělat s láskou... za práci v oboru orální historie jsem nikdy neobdržel žádnou mzdu...” Rozhovor s profesorem Alessandrem Portellim* 115

### 3. Recenze a reflexe | Reviews and Reflections

<b>JIŘÍ ŠTAIF</b> – <i>Modernizace na pokračování. Společnost v českých zemích (1770–1918)</i> (Pavel Himl)	133
<b>MARTIN NODL</b> – <i>Na vlnách dějin. Minulost – přítomnost – budoucnost českého dějepisectví</i> (Jan Horský)	140
<b>DANIELA MYSLIWIEZ-FLEISS</b> – <i>Die Fabrik als touristische Attraktion. Entdeckung eines neuen Erlebnisraums im Übergang zur Moderne</i> (Zdeněk Nebřenský)	155
<b>E. MICHAEL GERLI, RYAN D. GILES (EDD.)</b> – <i>The Routledge Hispanic Studies Companion to Medieval Iberia: Unity in Diversity</i> (David de Pablo)	161
Editorial Note	167
Upozornění redakce	170

# THE FUTURE SEEN FROM THE EDGE OF SOCIETY: CONTEMPORARY RUSSOPHONE COMMUNIST SCI-FI

Anastasia Mitrofanova

Analysing contemporary Russophone communist science fiction, this article aims to find out how this literary stream envisions the transition to the communist socio-economic formation. Communist sci-fi assumes that scientific and technological progress will inevitably be accompanied by progress in social relations and morals. The author's position is that its closest analogy is not Soviet science fiction, but the literature of socialist realism. Contrary to the classical Marxist position that the progressive development of the human personality results from the progressive development of productive forces communist sci-fi envisions making a new person more like a miraculous transfiguration under the impact of the forces beyond human imagination and control. The author concludes that this literature implicitly states that the new people precede communist society. The research methodology consists of the critical analysis of texts produced by communist sci-fi writers that are seen in the broader context of Soviet literature of the 20th century.

**Keywords:** communist sci-fi, Soviet sci-fi, science fiction, socialist realism, Ivan Efremov

*Anastasia Mitrofanova* is a Leading Researcher at the Institute of Sociology of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences; Professor at the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, [anastasia-mit@mail.ru](mailto:anastasia-mit@mail.ru)

Communist science fiction (sci-fi) is the self-identification of a trend in contemporary Russophone (not Russian since some authors live outside Russia) sci-fi literature. It is not a consolidated art group, but rather a loose stream that

includes authors presenting contradictory visions of what communism is (from Trotskyism to Stalinism) and how to achieve it; still, all of them declare adherence to Marxism. These authors normally are not followers of systemic (participating in elections) communist parties and remain basically unnoticed by the latter. Communist sci-fi has been discussed on non-partisan Marxist YouTube channels, such as *Station Marx* and *Praktischer Materialismus* (these are the original titles, not translations from Russian). No information is available on the readership of this literature, which is accessible free of charge on the internet. The authors do not make their living through literary work, and no marketing research on their audience has ever been done. There are, however, indirect signs that this stream is gradually gaining popularity outside its original ideological milieu. Six novels by Yana Zavatskaya (b. 1970) are available commercially in both print and electronic form; in 2019 she was awarded the independent literary prize ‘She Who Runs on the Waves’<sup>1</sup> for the best female sci-fi character in her novel *The Cold Zone*.<sup>2</sup>

Post-Soviet communist sci-fi was formally born in 2007 when an eponymous LiveJournal community (now discontinued) was launched. Since 2013 seven issues of the almanac *Runagate Rampant* have been published; in 2017 a printed almanac-based book *The Chronicles of the World Commune* was released. In 2013, a collection of short stories, *There is a Future!*, was published. There have also been several literary contests; of them, *The USSR-2061* resulted in a printed collection of short stories (2017). From 2013 onward, several left-wing web communities host a contest of social and political sci-fi. Initially, it was called The USSR-2091, but eventually, it has been renamed KUB-2091, where KUB (cube in Russian) means “The Concept of Universal Future” (Kontseptsiya Universalnogo Budushchego). The motto of the contest sounds like “The future as it should be!”

The political aspects of post-Soviet sci-fi have been widely discussed in academic literature,<sup>3</sup> but only a few publications are so far dedicated to com-

1 A reference to an eponymous novel by Aleksandr Grin (1880–1932).

2 The action takes place soon after the Third World War. The world is divided into two parts: most of it is controlled by the communards, but a lesser part preserves capitalism. Depicting the capitalist part, the author extrapolates some contemporary trends of economic development, especially the reduction of the rate of return and subsequent increase of exploitation. Capitalists in their part of the world exacerbate universal environmental crisis, while the communards are restoring the eco-system. Since they share one planet, the communards initiate Operation Sunrise to provoke an uprising and to invade, at the same time, the territory of capitalists.

3 See: VSEVOLOD REVICH, *Perekrestok utopii. Sudby fantastiki na fone sudeb strany*, Moscow 1998; KONSTANTIN FRUMKIN, *Imperii i spetsluzhby v fantastike*, Svobodnaiya mysl XXI 2/2004, pp. 76–83; KONSTANTIN FRUMKIN, *Alternativno-istoricheskaya fantastika kak*

munist SF.<sup>4</sup> This article aims to find out how communist sci-fi authors envision the transition from contemporary society to the communist formation and the extent to which they stay within their declared Marxist approach. The research methodology consists of the critical analysis of texts produced by communist sci-fi writers and seen in the broader context of Soviet literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have chosen the texts of the authors most well-known among sci-fi lovers and in the communist movement, and some representative short stories from *There is a Future!* I also used public declarations made by communist sci-fi writers and my interviews with them. This article implies no quantitative research regarding either producing or consuming the literary works discussed herein.

## Communist sci-fi as a literary genre

In the opinion of a leading author, Velimir Doloev (b.1988),<sup>5</sup> communist sci-fi is literature about the communist future or the period of transition to it.<sup>6</sup> Commu-

- forma istoricheskoi pamyati*, *Istoricheskaya ekspertiza* 4/2016, pp. 17–28; VIKTOR KOVALYOV, *Nashe fantasticheskoe budushchee (politicheskie diskursy i politicheskie prognozy v sovremennoi rossiiskoi fantastike: za i protiv) (Part I)*, *Politiya* 1/2008, pp. 42–64; VIKTOR KOVALYOV, *Nashe fantasticheskoe budushchee (politicheskie diskursy i politicheskie prognozy v sovremennoi rossiiskoi fantastike: za i protiv) (Part II)*, *Politiya* 2/2008, pp. 58–75; VIKTOR KOVALYOV, *Nashe nepredskazuemoe proshloe: popast v alternativu*, *Rossiya i sovremenniy mir* 1/2014, pp. 141–161; ALEKSANDR LOBIN, *Povestvovatelnoe prostranstvo i magistrálny syuzet sovremennoi istoricheskoi fantastiki*, *Uliyanovsk* 2008; LEONID FISHMAN, *Kartina budushchego u rossiiskikh fantastov*, *Lipetsk* 2008; PATRICE LAJOYE, *L'imaginaire russe en quête de futur: état des lieux*, *Galaxies* 11/2011, pp. 66–76; PATRICE LAJOYE, *La tentation totalitariste dans la SF russe actuelle*, *Galaxies* 33/2015, pp. 111–114; VIKTORIYA SHIRKOVA-LAJOYE, *Le héros au service du peuple dans la Fantastika postsoviétique*, *La Revue russe* 42/2014, pp. 43–52; MARK BASSIN, IRINA KOTKINA, *The Etnogenex Project: Ideology and Science Fiction in Putin's Russia*, *Utopian Studies* 27-1/2016, pp. 53–76; MARIA GALINA, *Vermutsya i peremenit. Alternativnaya istoriya Rossii kak otrazhenie travmaticheskikh tochek massovogo soznaniya postsovetskogo cheloveka*, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 146-4/2017, pp. 258–271; OLEKSANDR ZABIRKO, *The Magic Spell of Revanchism. Geopolitical Visions in Post-Soviet Speculative Fiction (Fantastika)*, *The Ideology and Politics Journal* 1/2018, pp. 66–134; MIKHAIL SUSLOV, PER-ARNE BODIN (eds.) *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia: Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia*, London 2020, et al.
- 4 ANASTASIA MITROFANOVA, *Religio-Political Utopia by Iana Zavatskaia*, in: *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia: Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia*, (eds.) Mikhail Suslov and Per-Arne Bodin, London 2020, pp. 155–174; ANASTASIA MITROFANOVA, *Teologiya osvobodheniya v sovremennoi russkoyazychnoi fantastike*, *Vek globalizatsii* 2/2020, pp. 119–133.
- 5 A pen name: Velimir was a pseudonym of the revolutionary poet Viktor Khlebnikov (1885–1922); Doloev originates from *doloi!* (Down with!).
- 6 STATION MARX, *Fantasticheskiy likbez*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=66\\_1LCEI2Uc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66_1LCEI2Uc) (accessed on 7 April 2019).

nist sci-fi in general is based on the assumption that scientific and technological progress should inevitably be accompanied by what they see as progress in social relations and morals. Contemporary commercial sci-fi literature, on the contrary, combines, in its vision of the future, technological achievements with archaic social relations ('space-based feudalism' with many faces, or some form of fascism). This trend can be found in many space operas, such as Edmond Hamilton's *Star Kings*, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, and *Star Wars* films.

If understood broadly, communist sci-fi should include utopian novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as most Soviet science fiction. This publication concentrates on communist sci-fi in a narrow sense – i.e., on a specific genre of Soviet and post-Soviet literature (see Doloev's definition above) founded by Soviet writer Ivan Efremov (1908–1972) as a part of his stance against Western space opera, particularly against abovementioned Hamilton.<sup>7</sup> Efremov restored the tradition of the 1920s to write about the communist future, which by the late 1930s had been gradually replaced by the 'fantastic stories of the approaching day' depicting 'near-future improvements on already existing technical innovations.'<sup>8</sup> Contemporary authors recurrently address the motifs from Efremov's most famous novels: *The Andromeda Nebula* (1957) and *The Hour of the Bull* (1957). Viktor Kovalyov mentions that although in the post-Soviet period novels are much less often read for entertainment, they progressively gain popularity as the objects of exploration and discussion.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary communist sci-fi writers honour Efremov as a revolutionary artist;<sup>10</sup> in a short story by Iya Koretskaya, 'Enceladus', aliens take back their decision to destroy an earthly spaceship because one of the crew opens Efremov's novel.<sup>11</sup>

Soviet science fiction was, by definition, a highly politicized genre: it discussed topics with the potential to pose an ideological threat because it could have presented an image of a future incompatible with dogmatic Marxism-Leninism, or it could have discussed social-cum-psychological issues (such as artificial intelligence) making it possible to accuse it of idealism, mysticism, or departure

7 See: ANATOLII BRITIKOV, *Russkii sovetskii nauchno-fantasticheskii roman*, Leningrad 1970, p. 232.

8 RAFAIL NUDELMAN, *Soviet Science Fiction and the Ideology of Soviet Society*, Science Fiction Studies 16-1/1989, p. 46.

9 VIKTOR KOVALYOV, *Ot ideologii k utopii. Kommunisticheskii proekt Ivana Efremova*, Nasledie 1/2019, p. 106.

10 STATION MARX.

11 IYA KORETSKAYA, *Entselad*, Byinyi brodyaga 1/2013, pp. 4–7, <http://brodyaga.tilda.ws/#s1>



from state-supported atheism.<sup>12</sup> For example, after the release of *The Andromeda Nebula*, Efremov was immediately criticized for the fact that in the future people 'do not know the names of Marx and Engels.'<sup>13</sup> Soviet sci-fi contained some elements of entertainment, but no way could it be purely entertaining. It was a serious literary genre, and its most talented representatives were involved in social blueprinting and prognostication, which offered an alternative to the ideology-dominated social sciences.<sup>14</sup> Some sci-fi writers were part of the ruling elite. For example, Georgii Shakhnazarov (1924–2001), an employee of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, published sci-fi under the pseudonym Shakh; another functionary from the same body, Evgenii Veltistov (1934–1989), wrote sci-fi for the youth. In the USSR, sci-fi was not niche literature; it was the mass reading of the Soviet science-and-technology intelligentsia and students.<sup>15</sup> Thousands of Soviet citizens from the 1970s–1980s joined 'clubs of sci-fi lovers' – public associations mostly initiated from below.<sup>16</sup>

- 12 See: R. NUDELMAN, *Soviet Science Fiction*; BIRGIT MENZEL, *Russian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature*, in: *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, (eds.) Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel, Munich 2005, pp. 117–150; ERIK SIMON, *The Strugatskys in Political Context*, *Science Fiction Studies* 31-3/2004, pp. 378–406; MATTHIAS SCHWARTZ, *Guests from Outer Space: Occult Aspects of Soviet Science Fiction*, in: *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*, (eds.) Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagmeister and Glatzer Rosenthal, Berlin 2012, pp. 209–237; MATTHIAS SCHWARTZ, *How Nauchnaia Fantastika Was Made: The Debates about the Genre of Science Fiction from NEP to High Stalinism*, *Slavic Review* 72-2/2013, pp. 224–246, et al.
- 13 VLADIMIR KOMISSAROV, 'Etogo ozhidali...': roman I.A.Efremova 'Tumannost Andromedy' i futuristicheskie proekty sovetskoi intelligentsii, Ivanovo 2017, p. 42.
- 14 See: ILIA KUKULIN, *Alternative Social Blueprinting in Soviet Society of the 1960s and the 1970s, or Why Left-Wing Political Practices Have Not Caught on in Contemporary Russia*, *Russian Studies in History* 49-4/2011, pp. 51–92; VLADIMIR KOMISSAROV, *Diskussii v srede intelligentsii o sotsialnykh funktsiyakh nauchnoi fantastiki*, *Intelligentsiya i mir* 2/2014, pp. 46–51; VLADIMIR KOMISSAROV, *Intelligentsiya, fantastika i sotsialnye prognozy v sovetskom obschestve 1960–80-kh godov*, *Intelligentsiya i mir* 2/2015, pp. 61–70; V. KOVALYOV, *Ot ideologii k utopii. Kommunisticheskii proekt Ivana Efremova*, pp. 104–118; ELENA BURYAK, ALEKSEI TOMAROV, 'Prizrak kommunizma' v sovetskoi literature, *Vestnik Udmurtskogo Universiteta. Seriya Istoriya i Filologiya* 92-1/2019, pp. 54–61, et al.
- 15 MIKHAIL SUSLOV, *Introduction*, in: *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia: Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia*, (eds.) Mikhail Suslov and Per-Arne Bodin, London 2020, p. 6; see also: MARK LIPOVETSKY, *The Poetics of ITR Discourse: In the 1960s and Today*, *Ab Imperio* 1/2013, pp. 109–139; ILIA KUKULIN, *Periodika dlya ITR: sovetskie nauchno-populyarnye zhurnaly i modelirovanie interesov pozdnesovetskoi nauchno-tekhniceskoi intelligentsii*, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 3/2017, pp. 61–85.
- 16 VLADIMIR KOMISSAROV, *Samodeyatelnye ob'edineniya intelligentsii v pozdnem SSSR: kluby liubiteli fantastiki*, *Intelligentsiya i mir* 4/2019, pp. 82–97.

Post-Soviet Russophone sci-fi literature inherited many of these features. It includes some purely entertaining pieces that resemble Western commercial fiction, but they are rare and often ironical. Most post-Soviet SF, even while entertaining the reader, tries to raise meaningful social and psychological issues. Sci-fi continues to be read massively, and the number of people who write it in the Russian language is huge: according to some estimates, annually no less than seven hundred new books are being published,<sup>17</sup> not taking into account the virtually countless pieces produced by the fandom subculture.<sup>18</sup> Communist SF, being non-commercial and web-based, can hardly be estimated formally.

Post-Soviet sci-fi covers all possible ideologies; even a collection of feminist and queer short stories has been issued.<sup>19</sup> Most ideological literature is non-commercial and hardly known to anyone even within the community of sci-fi lovers. As for the mainstream, where some writers have been able to achieve financial success, it is dominated by so-called conservative, or imperial sci-fi (these terms are used both by authors, as self-identification, and by external observers). These literary works deny progressive social development and demonstrate wishes 'to restore the past rather than create the future.'<sup>20</sup> This future-in-the-past can vary from pre-revolutionary Russia to the Soviet Union under Stalin. Many successful post-Soviet sci-fi authors (Sergei Lukyanenko, Vasilii Golovachev, Vyacheslav Rybakov, etc.) are part of this stream.<sup>21</sup>

17 MIKHAIL SUSLOV, *Conservative Science Fiction in Contemporary Russian Literature and Politics*, in: *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia: Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia*, (eds.) Mikhail Suslov and Per-Arne Bodin, London 2020, p. 108

18 BORIS STEPANOV, *'If I forget anything at all, it's unlikely the stars will accept us...': sci-fi fan communities, post-Soviet nostalgia, and contemporary cinematic experience*, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 15-1/2021, pp. 70–90.

19 GEORGII MAMEDOV, OKSANA SHATALOVA (eds.), *Sovsem drugie: Sbornik feministkoi i kvir-fantastiki*, Bishkek 2018.

20 M. SUSLOV, *Conservative Science Fiction*, p. 5; see also: MIKHAIL SUSLOV, *Of Planets and Trenches: Imperial Science Fiction in Contemporary Russia*, *The Russian Review*, 75-4/2016, pp. 562–578; MARIA GALINA, *Ressentiment and Post-Traumatic Syndrome in Russian Post-Soviet Speculative Fiction: Two Trends*, in: *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia: Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia*, (eds.) Mikhail Suslov and Per-Arne Bodin, London 2020, pp. 39–60; VIKTOR SHNIRELMAN, *'Respectable Xenophobia': Science Fiction, Utopia and Conspiracy*, in: *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia: Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia* (eds.) Mikhail Suslov and Per-Arne Bodin, London 2020, pp. 175–201, etc.

21 Post-Soviet Russophone sci-fi is not totally politicized; there are literary works of quality dedicated to philosophical and psychological issues (e.g., by Marina and Sergei Diachenko, Maria Galina, et al.).

Communist sci-fi is significantly different from this background because of its future-oriented, non-nostalgic nature. Communist writers do not intend to restore the USSR; they are interested in understanding the reasons for its failure in order not to repeat Soviet mistakes. At the same time, it differs from Western left-wing sci-fi represented by such authors as Ursula Le Guin, Iain Banks, Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, Joanna Russ, and China Miéville: the latter is mostly anti-utopian, while communist sci-fi presents blueprints of the desired image of the future.

Communist sci-fi writers sometimes present themselves as continuing the traditions of the Soviet sci-fi of the 1960s–1980s, but their works are, in fact, much closer to the genre of socialist realism.<sup>22</sup> First of all, communist sci-fi originates from socialist realism; this connection will be discussed below. Besides, these genres function in the same mode. Contrary to its name, socialist realism does not depict reality as it is, but – according to the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Literature*, which summed up the achievements of Soviet literary theory – presents reality ‘in its revolutionary development’.<sup>23</sup> Alexander Fadeyev (1901–1956), a leading Soviet writer and a theorist of socialist realism, addressing in 1934 the First Congress of Soviet Writers, declared that, unlike ‘old time realism’, socialist realism can see ‘the progressive elements of the historic development, the progressive people of our time; to see the tomorrow of humankind’.<sup>24</sup>

Utopian socialist Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828–1889)<sup>25</sup> was seen by Soviet theorists as a forerunner of socialist realism because in his dissertation he wrote that in case something is not present in reality, art should replace reality to become for people ‘the textbook of life’.<sup>26</sup> Chernyshevsky himself used this literary method: depicting his ‘new people’ and an ‘extraordinary man’, he admitted that such personalities belong more to the future than to the present. ‘This type [of people] was born recently; it did not yet exist in my time, although I am not very old’, he wrote.<sup>27</sup> Soviet theorists of literature, nevertheless, refused to admit

22 About this genre, see: THOMAS LAHUSEN, EVGENY DOBRENKO (eds.), *Socialist Realism without Shores*, Durham 1997.

23 DMITRII MARKOV, LEV TIMOFEEV, *Sotsialisticheskie realism*, in: *Literaturnyi entsiklopedicheskii slovar*, (eds.) V. M. Kozhevnikov, P. A. Nikolaev, Moscow 1987, p. 414.

24 Quoted in: SERGEI PETROV, *Sotsialisticheskie realizm*, Moscow 1987, p. 166,

25 See: NORMAN G. O. PEREIRA, *The Thought and Teachings of N.G. Černyševskij*, The Hague 1975.

26 Quoted in: LEONID HELLER, *Vselennaya za predelami dogmy. Razmysleniya o sovetskoj fantastike*, London 1985, p. 141

27 NIKOLAY CHERNYSHEVSKY, *Čto delat?*, in: NIKOLAY CHERNYSHEVSKY, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomakh*, Moscow 1939, v. 11, pp. 144–145.

that Chernyshevsky was a socialist realist because he never depicted the working class; instead, they promoted Maxim Gorky as the first genuine socialist realism writer.<sup>28</sup>

In this article, I would like to focus less on Soviet literary theory and its history, and more on how contemporary scholars re-evaluate socialist realism. Evgenii Dobrenko theorizes that socialist realism depicts the imagined present, being thus ‘the machine that transforms Soviet reality into socialism’.<sup>29</sup> While the realism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was constructing recognizable reality, socialist realism presented reality as unrecognizable. Bernice Rosenthal wrote that the illusionary ‘new reality’ created by socialist realism simply contradicted people’s practical experiences.<sup>30</sup> The paradox of socialist realism is that its recognizable image of the present is envisioned as something more substantial than what Lenin earlier defined as the reality given to us in sensations (this definition was obligatory to memorize for all Soviet students from high school to university),<sup>31</sup> i.e., socialist realism – unlike sci-fi – denies that it depicts imagined reality.

Soviet science fiction of the 1930s through the mid-1950s, known as close targeting sci-fi (because it depicted only the very near future), was a variation of socialist realism.<sup>32</sup> In the post-Stalin period, after socialist realism had ceased to exist, this variation engendered two literary currents. One of them was science fiction per se, which openly admitted that it depicted imagined things (e.g., the future, other planets, artificial intelligence, etc.). The second one was a fantastical tendency within the new literature of the Thaw (by which confessional prose was known), which tried to depict things simply as they were but located them in sci-fi settings. The community of Soviet sci-fi writers dispersed between ‘the Efremov’s school’ and the seminars of young sci-fi writers led by the Strugatsky brothers.<sup>33</sup> Efremov, who had started his literary career as a socialist realist writer,

28 S. PETROV, *Sotsialisticheskii realizm*, p. 34; see also: Vladimir Piskunov, *Znamenosty: obraz kommunista v sovetskoi literature*, Moscow 1983, p. 26.

29 EVGENY DOBRENKO, *Politekonomiya sotsrealizma*, Moscow 2007, p. 28.

30 BERNICE ROSENTHAL, *Sotsrealizm i nitszsheanstvo*, in: *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*, (eds.) H. Gunter and E. Dobrenko, S.-Petersburg 2000, p. 57.

31 VLADIMIR LENIN, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism. Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*, in: *Lenin: Collected Works*, Vol. 14, Moscow 1977, p. 126.

32 ELANA GOMEL, *Gods like Men: Soviet Science Fiction and the Utopian Self*, *Science Fiction Studies*, 31-3/2004, p. 361; see also: M. SCHWARTZ, *How Nauchnaia Fantastika Was Made*; ARTEM KRAVCHENKO, *Gosti v budushchee: ‘pionerskaya utopiya’ i sovetskaya deistvitelnost*, *Logos*, 27-5/2017, pp. 187–218.

33 VLADIMIR KOMISSAROV, *Futuristicheskie proekty I.A.Efremova i brat'ev Strugatskikh v realiyakh nachala XXI stoletiya*, *Intelligentsiya i mir* 3/2009, pp. 100–113.

preserved many qualities of the genre, such as, for example, the lack of interest in portraying a human inner world. The Strugatskys had left socialist realism behind altogether (except in their earliest works) and were, in fact, closer to confessional prose: they portrayed their contemporaries disguised as the people of the Communist future.<sup>34</sup> Efremov, in his preface to *The Hour of the Bull*, argued against their approach and insisted that the people of the future would not be ‘unbalanced, impolite, talkative, and flatly ironical’ like ‘undereducated and badly mannered idlers of our time.’<sup>35</sup>

Socialist realism affected contemporary communist sci-fi much more strongly than post-Stalin science fiction did. Their works are full of direct and indirect references to classical socialist realism works. For instance, many characters by Zavatskaya seem loaned from the Soviet novels and films of the 1930s, or even later. Aleksandr Kommari (b. 1962) has produced a series of short stories united by the figure of Commissar Levinson, a personage from Fadeyev’s novel *The Rout* (1927). Efremov’s role, however, was crucial because he was the first writer to apply the method of socialist realism not to the present but the future. He was in many aspects isolated. Although some other sci-fi writers (Sergei Pavlov, Sergei Snegov, and many other less-talented and now-forgotten authors) tried to follow in his footsteps, post-Stalinist Soviet sci-fi was actually dominated by the Strugatskys’ imitators. Efremov was not the only Soviet writer depicting a distant communist future,<sup>36</sup> but for him showing a communist society through the eyes of people who lived there was a matter of principle. Like him, communist sci-fi writers were trying to imagine, first of all, the social relations and morality of a communist society, not just its scientific and technical superiority. In both cases, literature is primarily a machine for producing the desired reality.

## The importance of the new person

The absence of the state and its apparatus of coercion is, probably, the most distinctive marker of communism. The new (Soviet) person was one of the goals declared within the project of building a communist society in the USSR as a pre-

34 V. KOMISSAROV, *‘Eto go ozbidali...’*, p. 99.

35 IVAN EFREMOV, *Chas byka*, Moscow 1988, p. 4.

36 See: A. KRAVCHENKO, *Gosti v budushchee*; IRINA KASPE, *V soyuze s utopiei. Smyslovnye rubezhi pozdnesovetskoj kultury*, Moscow 2018, pp. 153–157.

requisite to the abolition of the state. This new person, a communitard,<sup>37</sup> would not need external coercion implemented by the state, replacing it with intrinsic ethically based self-restriction. Leonid Heller denotes it as the exteriorization of the human inner world when everyone's thoughts and feelings are visible to everyone else.<sup>38</sup> Alternatively, the same phenomenon can be understood as an interiorization of external state-induced coercion. This goal seems so hard to achieve that even in a mature communist society, Efremov mentions, education and the cultivation of personality lasts a lifetime.<sup>39</sup>

Portraying the new Soviet person, whose 'high qualities' mirror 'the new social relations, the spirit of collectivism', was seen by Soviet literary theory as 'one of the central ideological-cum-aesthetical functions and tasks of literature and art'.<sup>40</sup> Socialist realists presented this new person in its revolutionary development, meaning, as someone who already exists. While the personality of our time is being torn apart by contradictions and doubts, the new person is static and has no internal contradictions. Andrey Shcherbenok emphasizes the differences between the contradictive and changing characters of the 1960s and the petrified heroes of the socialist realist film.<sup>41</sup> Dobrenko, discussing the protagonists of a socialist realist novel about a workers' family, *The Zhurbins* by Vsevolod Kochetov (1912–1973), writes that they live in an 'elevated reality' and that their speeches are inadequate, their behaviour implausible, and their motifs idealist; finally he calls the Zhurbins 'the steel that needs no more tempering' – a reference to Nikolai Ostrovsky's model socialist realist novel *How the Steel was Tempered* (1932–1933).<sup>42</sup> Likewise, in Efremov's interpretation, the communitards, in the eyes of less developed aliens, appear nearly inhuman: they are overly serious and concentrated, non-talkative, not interested in humour, and they are constrained in expressing emotions.<sup>43</sup>

The new communist person in contemporary sci-fi looks very much like the hero of a social realist novel, except that communist writers freely discuss the issues of sexuality. Mariam (who, by the way, has a romantic affair with another

37 This term, initially designating the members of the Paris Commune (1870–1871), was used in the Soviet Union, and is still utilized in Russia to designate both the people of the communist future and the contemporaries who live or work in communes.

38 L.HELLER, *Vselennaya za predelami dogmy*, p. 149.

39 I. EFREMOV, *Chas byka*, p. 145.

40 S. PETROV, *Sotsialisticheskiy realizm*, p. 139.

41 ANDREI SHCHERBENOK, *Psikhika bez psikhologii*, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 124/2013, pp. 79–92.

42 E. DOBRENKO, *Politekonomiya sotsrealizma*, p. 344.

43 I. EFREMOV, *Chas byka*, p. 168.

woman), the protagonist of Doloev's *Flowers Grow Through Bones*,<sup>44</sup> joins a revolutionary movement at thirteen years old, and the reader has no clue as to why she has made this choice.<sup>45</sup> It is clear from the text that the character had an average post-Soviet family of middle income and never lived in extreme poverty, or survived family tragedies. Although Mariam is the narrator, we know virtually nothing about her inner world; her personality remains unchanged and integral from the beginning to the end. Similarly, we do not know why Masha, the protagonist and narrator of Zavatskaya's *The Reboot* (a prequel for *The Cold Zone*), also thirteen years old, joins city self-defence forces – a nascent communist militia.<sup>46</sup> The new people, as portrayed by communist sci-fi authors, seem to be the same 'steel that needs no more tempering'. Sometimes they are reminiscent of the stories of the saints who, from their childhood, demonstrated supernatural abilities, for example, turning away from the mother's breasts on fasting days. Some authors view the supernatural qualities of their characters with a share of self-irony: in Doloev's novel, the main antagonist suggests that Mariam came not from the real world but 'a competing alternative history book'.<sup>47</sup>

Noticeably, contemporary authors avoid writing too much about human personality in a communist society. They either describe periods of temporary departure from communism (postapocalyptic novels), or they show a mature communist society through the eyes of an alien observer (e.g., an immigrant from a less-developed planet). In the first case, the communist reality is scattered; in the second case, the observer is never able to understand the complexity of a communist society and perceives it in a fragmented way. In *The Cold Zone*, Zavatskaya even exploits an old utopian trick with our frozen contemporary, who wakes up in the future.

44 The action takes place approximately thirty years after the world communist revolution. A group of youngsters led by a female revolutionary veteran Mariam finds the hibernated bodies of capitalists, plugged into a virtual reality. In the personal reality of a Russian oligarch, the socialist revolution never happened, and he is the heir of the Russian throne. The communards penetrate this reality to find a revolutionary underground organized by its self-programming virtual characters. They support digital revolutionaries and overthrow monarchy in the virtual reality.

45 VELIMIR DOLOEV, *Tsvety prorastaiut skvoz kosti*, [http://samlib.ru/d/doloew\\_w/3flowers.shtml](http://samlib.ru/d/doloew_w/3flowers.shtml) (accessed on 12 December 2016).

46 The same age of the characters and their same names (Mariam is the Oriental version of Maria, Masha) suggest that Zavatskaya somehow debates with Doloev.

47 V. DOLOEV, *Tsvety prorastaiut skvoz kosti*.

Efremov put forward the idea of departures, or failures, on the way to galaxy-wide communism. He designated such periods as 'inferno'.<sup>48</sup> In *The Andromeda Nebula*, he mentioned 'uprisings';<sup>49</sup> in *The Hour of the Bull*, a 'great battle' after which most historical data had been lost.<sup>50</sup> Besides, Efremov expressed this idea indirectly: for example, at the beginning of *The Nebula*, we suddenly find a description of a communist planet unintentionally destroyed by radiation. This idea of temporary departures was inspired by revelations about Stalin's terror in 1956 (*The Nebula* was published in 1957); Efremov saw the Thaw as a return to the ideals of his revolutionary youth.<sup>51</sup> He also suggested that such departures, or failures, are possible at a personal level too, when a communnard for a while becomes a person from the past, torn by passions.<sup>52</sup>

This idea is widely exploited by contemporary communist sci-fi writers, allowing them not to elaborate on the details of social relations and morality of a communist society. In case something looks suspiciously like our time, it can always be presented in terms of the transition period (assuming that communism is inevitable, any historical period can be seen as a transition period) when the sprouts of a new society co-exist with the rudiments of the past.

Communist sci-fi often portrays our time as a period of departure or failure, thus building it into a single imagined reality with a communist society that exists (or existed, or will exist) in the past, future, or a parallel world. For example, in a short story by Ivan Sobolev, 'Between dreams and reality',<sup>53</sup> contemporary capitalist Russia is a dream of the protagonist living either in the future communist world or in some idealized version of the Soviet Union. The story can also be interpreted alternatively: the protagonist lives under capitalism, seeing communism in his dreams. Many communist sci-fi writers portray the desired society apophatically – i.e., they describe what they find inappropriate today while hinting that in a communist society everything will be different.

Changing the focus from the ideal society to the present makes it possible for these writers to address contemporary problems and to continue ideological debates with their political adversaries, as well as between different streams

48 VIKTOR KOVALYOV, *Dve storony inferno: utopiya i antiutopiya v tvorchestve Ivana Efremova*, *Istoriya i sovremennost*, 1/2020, pp. 94–115.

49 IVAN EFREMOV, *Zvyozdnye korabli. Tumannost Andromedy*, Moscow 1987, p. 124.

50 I. EFREMOV, *Chas byka*, p. 182.

51 V. KOMISSAROV, 'Etogo ozhdali...', p. 101.

52 *The Nebula* even depicts a situation in which a former communnard, who has been isolated for doing dangerous experiments, tries to rape a woman.

53 IVAN SOBOLEV, *Mezh snom i yaviyu*, [http://samlib.ru/s/sobolew\\_i\\_a/mezh\\_snom\\_i\\_javju.shtml](http://samlib.ru/s/sobolew_i_a/mezh_snom_i_javju.shtml) (accessed on 1 October 2021).



within communism (e.g., Stalinists and Trotskyites). Nationalism, important for our contemporaries, is one of the much-discussed topics in communist SF. The authors agree on the post-ethnic and post-racial nature of the future society, where the 'national question' is finally resolved. Transcending race and ethnicity is one of the key characteristics of the people of a communist society. Doloev's main protagonist, Mariam Zaurovna Gerieva, apart from being in a same-sex relationship, is also an 'Azeri-Ukrainian-Chechen... identifying herself in forms as a communard by ethnicity'.<sup>54</sup> Accentuated non-ethnicity and non-race are to contract the reality of contemporary Russia, as well as of 'conservative' SF. Besides, the presence of race and ethnicity is used in communist sci-fi as a marker to expose the alien nature of the characters whose morals remain shaped by capitalist society.

### The mystery of transformation

Since the new communist person is radically different from the contemporary 'old' one, the central problem for communist sci-fi is what Irina Kaspe calls 'the moment of transgression', or 'the mystery of transformation', when our contemporary becomes a communard; imagining this moment seems more problematic than simply describing a communist society.<sup>55</sup> The strict Marxist position (*Theses On Feuerbach*, No 6) is that the progressive development of the human personality results from the progressive development of productive forces because the human essence is the ensemble of the social relations [i.e., relations of production].<sup>56</sup> The progress in the relations of production results, in its turn, from the progress of the productive forces. However, communist sci-fi portrays the emergence of a new person, as well as temporary departures from communism, as something detached from the development of the productive forces and the relations of production. The new person emerges for unclear reasons, and in the same manner, disappears.

A rational explanation is that ideal societies build elaborate systems of life-long education and correction for children and adults. However, it does not clarify how the above-mentioned Mariam and Maria managed to become new persons in their early teenage years, although both grew up in a period of failure and were never exposed to a communist pedagogical system. On the other

54 V. DOLOEV, *Tsvety prorastaiut skvoz kosti*.

55 I. KASPE, *V soyuze s utopiei*, p. 163.

56 KARLMARX, *Theses On Feuerbach (1845)*, [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm) (accessed on 1 October 2021).

hand, in a developed communist society, we still see people resistant to this ideal educational system; sometimes it suddenly turns out that it did not work for the majority.

Contemporary communist sci-fi that survived the trauma of the collapse of the world socialist system has a recurrent motif of the fragility of a communist society. Sometimes its catastrophic failure is caused by an external impact (e.g., an extra-terrestrial invasion), but in most cases, it results from domestic threats, represented by people of the old time, by selfish philistines having no intrinsic moral restrictions.<sup>57</sup> A picture of the destruction of a utopian society and its fall into the capitalist inferno can be found in Zavatskaya's *The Cross of the Empire*.<sup>58</sup> The catastrophe bursts out despite the omnipresent educational system to cultivate new people, not to mention the productive forces, which develop over the course of the novel, right before our eyes. The productive forces and the new relations of production based on them seem unable to prevent the failure of a communist society. This idea evidently contrasts the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, reminiscent of an essentialist concept of unchangeable human nature, which is unacceptable for Marxism.

Making (or unmaking) a new person in communist sci-fi looks more like a miraculous transfiguration. Like Saul becomes Paul, a person of the old time instantly changes under the impact of the forces beyond human imagination and control. Among them, there is outer space or the cosmos. People working in outer space are special, 'aerial', not chained to the material world; unsurprisingly, they can preserve the communist values even in case of a total social collapse. Contrary to them, the philistines are not aerial people: they are bound to material things. In an unfinished novel, *The Spaceship Soyuz*, Zavatskaya writes how in a period of departure, after the failure of the galactic Commune, a group of people accidentally finds a spaceship preserved from the communist past. They penetrate it initially with selfish intentions (to sell the vessel), but the atmosphere on board provides a transformative effect, gradually reshaping the invaders into communards.<sup>59</sup>

Salvation from outer space arrives to our contemporaries in short stories by Aleksandr Kommari. In 'The Letter from Baikonor' (the action takes place in 2007), a Soviet spaceship from an alternate world lands on a post-Soviet cos-

57 See: M. LIPOVETSKY, *The Poetics of ITR Discourse*, p. 120.

58 YANA ZAVATSKAYA, *Krest imperii*, [http://zhurnal.lib.ru/j/jenna\\_k/edoli.shtml](http://zhurnal.lib.ru/j/jenna_k/edoli.shtml) (accessed on 24 May 2007).

59 YANA ZAVATSKAYA, *Zvezdolyot Soyuz*, [http://samlib.ru/j/jenna\\_k/zvezdolet.shtml](http://samlib.ru/j/jenna_k/zvezdolet.shtml) (accessed on 28 October 2015).

modrome, opening an opportunity to escape from post-Soviet capitalist countries. A driver conscript takes his chance grabbing a ladder off the ship and flying away, while the narrator is regretting not doing the same.<sup>60</sup> The short story 'Gagarin' depicts collective salvation from the capitalist inferno when a flying saucer alights Yuri Gagarin, who did not perish and was rescued by extra-terrestrials.<sup>61</sup> A miraculous transformation is shown in 'Bathing the Red Horse',<sup>62</sup> when a disappointed contemporary communist decides to quit the movement but accidentally falls into the future, where he meets a communard and talks to him. The meeting strengthens the protagonist, and he returns to the political struggle.

In Zavatskaya's *Reboot*, we meet the narrator not just amid a historical failure, but also in the situation of her personal departure. Carried away by selfish thoughts, she has left the militia. She returns to the normality of being a new person after meeting a mysterious woman known as Ivolga (Hangbird), who behaves firmly as a communard, even in a post-apocalyptic situation ('the steel that needs no more tempering'). Subsequently, we find out that Ivolga has been sent to help a collapsing city from an earlier commune in Leningrad. It is somewhat unclear how long this commune has existed, because of its enormous social and moral superiority, which makes the reader infer that this Leningrad might be located in an alternate reality. At the same time, city dwellers, too, change unbelievably fast: within twenty-five years they evolve from mass cannibalism to a situation in which 'all the warehouses are full of free food and clothes'.<sup>63</sup>

To meet the communards, it is not necessary to be in the future or a parallel world. They can equally be found in the past. In 'The Last One'<sup>64</sup> by Kommari, the protagonist, living in contemporary Russia, is the last person on Earth who, at the age of five, met with Lenin, talked to him, and shook his hand. On the day of his death, he accidentally meets a boy passing by and transmits Lenin's words to him. At this point, the narration disrupts, and the next time we see this boy is after the communist revolution: in the future, he is the 'people's president' of Soviet Russia. The author does not explain the evolution of the character.

60 ALEKSANDR KOMMARI, *Pismo iz Baikonura*, <https://rabkrin.org/pismo-iz-baykonura-rasskaz/> (accessed on 28 March 2013).

61 ALEKSANDR KOMMARI, *Gagarin*, <http://samlib.ru/t/recensor/3kontrol.shtml#17> (accessed on 28 November 2009).

62 ALEKSANDR KOMMARI, *Kupanie krasnogo konya*, <https://rabkrin.org/kupanie-krasnogo-konya-rasskaz/> (accessed on 28 March 2013).

63 YANA ZAVATSKAYA, *Perezagruzka*, Moscow 2019.

64 ALEKSANDR KOMMARI, *Poslednii*, <http://samlib.ru/t/recensor/3kontrol.shtml#17> (accessed on 28 November 2009).

It seems that Lenin's sight, touch, and words, transmitted by an intermediary (like grace), have instantly transformed him from an average boy into a new person. In a short story by the late Anna Gorelysheva (1980–2012), 'The Marsh of Enthusiasts', a young man from the future who committed an antisocial act (hacking) is sent for correction to the Soviet Union of the 1960s.<sup>65</sup> He joins a student group of devout young communists, who are definitely new people, and undergoes correction under their influence, like some labour camp inmate in a socialist realist novel. The characters from *The Spaceship Soyuz* too fall into the past to find out that a communist society did not disappear: it still exists nearby, in the ideal eternity, beyond the past and the future.

## Conclusion

The grounds for moral and social progress in contemporary Russophone communist sci-fi differs substantially from the classical Marxist position as reflected in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, which suggests that the new communist personality derives from the progressive relations of production that, in turn, change depending on the development of productive forces. Communist SF, following the tradition of Nikolay Chernyshevsky and socialist realism, implicitly states that the new people precede a communist society. The transformation of our average contemporary into a communard has much in common with miracles. Nevertheless, communist sci-fi writers declare atheism; even Zavatskaya, who used to be a Catholic, now admits to being far from faith.<sup>66</sup> In most cases, the transformation requires a personal contact with the new people. Moving along the timeline in any direction, or travelling between parallel worlds, the characters may encounter the reality of victorious communism and acquire abilities to transform themselves into communards. Thus, as with socialist realism, communist sci-fi asserts the reality of a communist society through imagining and describing it. It brings the reader back to the eleventh of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, which declares that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'.<sup>67</sup>

65 ANNA GORELYSHEVA, *Marsh entuziastov*, in: Budushchee est: gorizonty mechty, (eds.) Nataliya Gorelysheva and Aleksandr Krasnyanskii, Lugansk 2013, pp. 105–112.

66 See A. MITROFANOVA, *Religio-Political Utopia by Iana Zavatskaia*; A. MITROFANOVA, *Teologiya osvobodzheniya*.

67 K. MARX, *Theses On Feuerbach*.