Non-Technological Narratives about Technology
in Russian Science Fiction

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Abstract

This essay for the inaugural issue of *Technology and Language* discusses Russian science fiction and utopias where technological devices and systems become active agents of the story, providing a perspective for treating social and political problems. Three major periods are covered in broad brushstrokes – the turn of the twentieth century when the industrial production went hand in hand with techno-optimism; the 1960s-1970s which were the Golden Era of Soviet science fiction, reflecting on technological achievements and social and ethical dimensions of technology; and post-Soviet literature that turns to dystopian and utopian narratives of socio-technical development. Throughout, science fiction was a venue for formulating national identity, reasoning on the essence of progress and coping with historical experience. As such, the literary imagination about technology was not technological at all, but was grounded in ideology and social concerns or identity, which assimilates technology to language and culture.

Keywords: Science Fiction; Utopia; Discourse; Representation of Technology; Progress; National Identity; Cosmism

Аннотация

В этом эссе для первого выпуска журнала *"Технологии в инфосфере" ("Technology and Language")* обсуждаются российская научная фантастика и утопии, в которых технологические устройства и системы становятся активными агентами истории, обеспечивая перспективу для решения социальных и политических проблем. Рассматриваются три основных периода: начало двадцатого века, когда промышленное производство шло рука об руку с техно-оптимизмом; 1960-1970-е годы – золотая эра советской научной фантастики, отражающей технологические достижения и социальные и этические аспекты технологий; постсоветская литература, обращающаяся к антиутопическим и утопическим рассказам о социально-техническом развитии. На протяжении всего времени научная фантастика была площадкой для формулирования национальной идентичности, рассуждений о сущности прогресса и исторического опыта. Таким образом, литературное воображаемое о технологии совсем не технологично, но сосредоточено на идеологии, социальных проблемах и идентичности.

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I suggest looking at literary texts as representations of our relation to and experience of technology. An example of this can be found in Russian novels and stories featuring advanced and futuristic technologies that play an important part in the plot – they influence the ways societies are organized, and the way people relate to each other and to the world. These texts include science fiction (involving plausible scientific premises), utopias, speculative fiction and even mystical stories where technology becomes an important actor. I will cover in broad brushstrokes various periods in which such literature flourished in Russian culture: the turn of the twentieth century when industrial production was affiliated with techno-optimism; the 1960s to 1970s which were the Golden Era of Soviet science fiction reflecting technological achievements and social and ethical dimensions of technology; and post-Soviet literature that turns to dystopian and utopian narratives of socio-technical development. In these works, technological devices and systems are not only accessories or stage props, but active agents of the story. They simultaneously provide a perspective for addressing social and political problems and raise concerns about the future and the social order. The plausibility of technologies and accuracy of forecasts are not really important here, what matters is the context in which technology is placed, how it is described and which fears, hopes, concerns are associated with it. This can reveal how science and utopian fiction discursively constitute technology, and what larger societal issues are exposed through technology.

Science fiction became popular in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. Although the quantity of texts never reached the level of American and British sci-fi literature, one can nevertheless observe a salient interest among Russian writers and readers in this genre. For the societies of the future or of distant lands that were described in literature, the novel technologies of energy, transport and communication did not only increase comfort, but helped improve the morale and the nature of social bonds (Nikiforova, 2017). These discussions of technology as a means for social perfection were unfolding against the background of the debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers about the right way for Russia. Literary works reflected what kind of progress there could be specifically for Russia and how it might reconcile science and religion. According to the Slavophiles' vision, devotion to tradition and religious values would allow for a harmonious and socially appropriate development of technology and industry (see the sci-fi novels by Alexander Krasnitsky, Vladimir Odoevsky, Sergei Sharapov, Nikolai Shelonsky).

There were texts that developed the idea of an alternative, non-Western technological progress. They played with the geographical position of Russia between West and East – and speculated on how different communities could relate to westernization or colonization. Europeanisation and modernization were represented as something negative and unwanted (Leonid Afanasiev "Trip to Mars", 1901). European hegemony could be questioned as well ("Andre's Diary. Trip on balloon to the North pole", anonymous short novel-mystification, 1897). In Alexander Bogdanov's "Red Star" (1908) Earth-Mars relations reproduce the ideological confrontation between Russia and

the West. The discussion about youth, barbarity and colossal possibilities of the Earth in comparison to the quiet old age of Mars finds a parallel in a similar opposition of Russia and Europe in the Slavophile tradition.

Philosophical reflection on space and space travel was developed within the framework of the tradition of so-called Cosmism. Nikolai Fedorov (1829-1903) is considered to be the originator of Cosmist thinking. He conceived of the philosophy of the common task: According to him, all of mankind should unite and concentrate on "the common task" of resurrecting the dead through scientific means and accommodating them on other planets. This idea conflated spiritual salvation and scientific rationalism calling upon the religious idea of resurrection and liberation from death together with the creation of a global brotherhood. Both missions, according to Fedorov, are enabled by technological solutions such as interstellar flying machines or a gigantic electrical apparatus that is capable of controlling the climate on Earth. Space narratives originating from cosmist thinking were a peculiar combination of orthodox thinking, utopian futurist visions and scientific rationality. Konstantin Tsiolkovsky – who is considered the "grandfather" of the Soviet space program – was a follower of Fedorov and shared his ethical and messianic ideas.

Soviet science fiction flourished especially during the Thaw from the mid-1950s to mid-1960s. Here, the most important names are Ivan Efremov, Kir Bulychev, Alexander Kazantsev, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. It was a period of hope for changes in political and social life, and the easing of censorship. All this gave way to the ideas of a variability of the future of the USSR and of the whole of humanity. At this point sci-fi became a genre in which it was possible to reflect on historical trauma, the experience of Stalinism, purges, and Civil war. Compositional techniques in science fiction allowed Soviet authors to encode the themes that otherwise would not have been possible with literature being subject to censorship. At the same time, Soviet science fiction echoed global concerns about the limits of industrial development.

Internationally known as cult sci-fi authors were the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. Their prose is deep and philosophical, and it questions technological progress and the moral issues of transforming human nature. In their novels, advanced technology – shown as harsh and oppressive in "Inhabited Island" (written in 1969) or harmonious and humane in the Noon Universe series – helps disclose the authors' concerns about the essence of technological optimism and the nature of human-technology relations. At the same time, Strugatskys' science fiction is a sort of reflexive prose that rethinks the tenets of Enlightenment and reasons about political regimes of the twentieth century (Kukulin, 2007).

Post-Soviet science fiction and futuristic fantasies question the ideals of contemporary civilization which is focused on information and communication technology and on biotechnology (for instance, "iPhuck 10" written in 2017 by Viktor Pelevin). They often focus on the problems of Russian identity, of political history and ideological orientation. There are utopian narratives that are built around a return to traditionalism. Mikhail Suslov and Per-Arne Bodin note that "conservative utopianism" became a distinctive feature connecting post-Soviet speculative fiction with nineteenth century Slavophile-inspired tradition. They sum up utopian narratives that are considered to be important components of Russian identity. These involve as a historical legacy the greatness of Soviet superpower with its technological achievements and messianic

strivings. They also involve specifically Russian values, ideology and tradition which keep standing in contrast to the "Western civilization." Finally they concern Russian culture (language and religion), Russian territory and its qualities as Euroasian "heartland" (Suslov, & Bodin, 2019, p. 9). Again, science fiction is used as a channel to reflect on historical events and to overcome historical trauma such as the fall of the USSR. It is manifested in a whole genre of alternative histories (Alexander Golodny, Andrey Lazarchuk, Artem Rybakov, Mikhail Uspensky).

Thus, in the history of Russian science fiction we observe a variety of roles that science and technology can play. According to Foucault, discourse reveals power relations in society as expressed through language and practices. In this Foucauldian sense, technology itself becomes a discourse in speculative fiction. Representations of technology address the questions of inclusion and exclusion of various groups in decision making about technological and social development. They define strategies of social organization, they manifest political and cultural ideals. In this way, literary imagination about technology is not technological at all, but is grounded in/focused on ideology, social concerns, or identity. This brings technology close to language and culture.

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