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Gods Like Men: Soviet Science Fiction and the Utopian Self

Western science fiction is often seen as a playground of posthuman “terminal identities” that arise in the wake of the death of the humanist subject (Bukatman 9). These identities are overwhelmingly cast in the mold of Donna Haraway’s cyborg: fluid, multiple, virtual, viral, “without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial,” undermining binary logic (Haraway 177). In opposition, the “traditional” humanist self is assumed to be unproblematic and ahistorical. It is unified, masculine, individualistic, liberal, and autonomous, the Foucauldian “figure” of the Man of the Enlightenment.

The binary of human/posthuman, however, is as suspect as most binaries. It ignores the history of subjectivity, which is far more complex that the simple declaration of the postmodern death of Man would suggest. The utopian tradition, for one thing, has generated many alternative versions of subjectivity. Among them the pride of place belongs to the Soviet New Man, the hero of classic Soviet sf.

Slavoj Žižek discusses the roots of what he calls the “sublime” subjectivity of the New Man in the cauldron of conflicting utopias of the last century. The New Man originates in the dream of a radical restructuring of both society and the individual, a dream shared by Communism and fascism (despite their different visions of what such a restructuring would entail). The history of the New Man’s violent gestation and aborted birth indicates that the cyborg is not the only alternative to the Man of the Enlightenment. The New Man challenges the traditional Western notion of the self by offering an alternative that is simultaneously humane and violent, utopian and apocalyptic, familiar and strange.

In what follows I will discuss representations of the New Man in the Soviet sf of the 1960s with the view of challenging the binary opposition human/posthuman. I will argue that the subject of Soviet sf represents a distinct and unique modality of the self, informed by the ideology of utopian humanism, whose imaginative triumph in Soviet sf (if not necessarily in Soviet society) also, paradoxically, spells its dissolution.

The paradoxes of the Soviet New Man that I will outline below express the aporia of the ideology that underpins his creation. This aporia stems from the self-contradictory relationship between utopia and history. On the one hand, the Soviet utopia inscribes itself in history as its inevitable consummation. On the other hand, Communism, as imagined in Soviet sf, cancels history and abolishes change. Thus, the utopian subject is both dynamic and static, both a fluid potentiality and a set goal.

A concomitant paradox has to do with so-called “socialist humanism,” the official ideology of the regime, one of whose slogans was “Proud to be a man” (“Chelovek—eto zvuchit gordo”). The Soviet New Man, as opposed to the Nazi
*Ubermensch*, was supposed to be both humdrum and sublime, both immeasurably better than, and the same as, the average citizen. This led to some strange contortions, for the utopian subject had to hold fast to his humanity while at the same time transcending it.

The ideology of the text I will be discussing in the next sections is not the same as the political views of its producer. It is taken for granted in the analysis of Western sf that what Jameson called “the ideology of the form” is relatively independent of the intentions of the author. But with regard to Soviet sf, and Soviet literature in general, it is still assumed that to “link politics and literature when we speak of the [Soviet Union] is natural,” politics being understood in the reductive sense of the author’s dissident or orthodox views (Brown 1). As a result, Soviet sf is often misread in two complementary ways, both of which stem from the refusal to analyze the Soviet text in terms of its own intrinsic codes.

The first misreading consists in interpreting sf texts as dissident allegories. While an allegorical element is undoubtedly important in Soviet sf, in particular in the Strugatsky brothers’ oeuvre, allegory and sf work at cross purposes, and when the allegorical element preponderates, it can fracture the text altogether (see my “The Poetics of Censorship”). Sf constructs self-consistent fictional worlds, while allegory requires a “network of topicality within itself to stand as that Real which it will undertake to neutralize” and thus the fictional world of the text is “menaced by the wealth of allusions to current events which threaten to dissolve it altogether” (Jameson, “Of Islands and Trenches” 82). But it is the sf level of the text that is shaped by those ideological assumptions that the regime and the opposition share and that enable their meaningful confrontation.

The second problematic strategy of reading Soviet texts assumes that they are “Marxist” by definition. But it is at best a very reductive way to describe the ideological apparatus of the giant Soviet state, which penetrated into every crevice of everyday life and shaped people’s bodies, emotions, thoughts, and desires, no less than it controlled the means of production. The nature of this ideology is to be elucidated by the study of Soviet cultural productions rather than by classifying texts according to the presumed degree of the author’s ideological commitment.3 Ideology is located not in the regime’s obligatory slogans but in the corporeal economy through which the subject, with its drives, pleasures, prohibitions, and identities, is constructed in discourse.

The main focus of my discussion will be on the period between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. This period is central to the history of the Soviet Union. Still warmed by Khrushchev’s “thaw” and not yet beginning the long slide into the twilight of the 1980s, ending with its inglorious collapse, the Soviet regime appeared to be stable, thus allowing its intelligentsia to take stock of the ideological underpinnings of socialism and to come to terms with the Terror, whose extent was partially revealed by Khrushchev at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956. The generation of the 1960s was on the cusp of a political change: the breeding ground of the dissident movement, it still did not abandon the Revolution’s utopian project. Very often, in fact, attacks on the regime were leveled in the name of a “pure” or “original” Communism
distorted by the powers-that-be. Vsevolod Revich, the author of one of the few histories of Soviet sf, significantly titled *The Crossroads of Utopias* (1998), describes the excitement of the “generation of the 60s” whose attempts to build “socialism with a human face” he defends against the dismissive cynicism of post-Communism Russia (7). Revich shows how central sf was to “the experience of the 60s” and credits it with “breaking the chains” that had bound Soviet culture during Stalin’s era (199). The utopian self of the Soviet New Man finds its most comprehensive articulation in the sf texts published in this period.

Three writers unquestionably dominated the sf in the 1960s and their influence on the subsequent development of the genre in the USSR and in Russia is incalculable and exceeds the influence of any comparable Western figure, with the possible exception of H.G. Wells. These writers are Ivan Efremov (1907-1972) and the brothers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (Arkady Natanovich Strugatsky, 1925-1991; Boris Natanovich Strugatsky, b. 1933), who wrote in collaboration.5 The importance of these writers in Soviet sf was such that their “popularity among Soviet readers was regarded as almost a law of nature, separate from and beyond the statistics which shuffled the relative popularity ratings of all other science fiction writers” (Howell vii). Vsevolod Revich points out that the publication of Efremov’s *The Andromeda Nebula* (1957) had “the effect of an explosion” that set into motion the dizzying development of sf in the 1960s, dominated first by Efremov and then by the Strugatskys (198).

The Strugatskys are still highly regarded in post-Communist Russia, while Efremov has been identified with the lost utopian dream.6 But there is no uninterrupted progression from the Soviet utopia to contemporary Russian sf, which is strongly influenced by Western models and still very much in flux. The distance between the two is measured not in years but in political, ideological, and social upheavals that have opened up an abyss between their cultural contexts. The best of contemporary Russian sf resembles Western postmodern fabulation or magic realism more than it does its predecessor (the worst of it equally resembles Western commercialized fantasy, proving that it is as easy to write endless imitations of Tolkien in Russian as in English). It may be tempting to construct a literary history that dismisses Soviet sf as a relic of a bygone age, now superceded by ideologically astute and artistically sophisticated postmodern fiction. But this is a vast oversimplification. Soviet sf is a coherent body of writing that reflects the cultural and ideological assumptions of a civilization that is not merely better or worse than the postmodern global village but is radically different from it.

The Future of the Past. The October Revolution of 1917 overturned not only the social order but also the order of literature: if the classic Russian tradition is dominated by psychological realism, the 1920s are marked by avant-garde experimentation, a significant part of which is cast in a utopian and fantastic mold. Writers such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Evgeny Zamyatin, Mikhail Bulgakov, Aleksei Tolstoi, and Andrei Platonov all contributed to the literary ferment that sought new forms and styles to capture the new world-in-the-making. Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Tolstoi’s *Aelita* (1923), Bulgakov’s *The Fatal
Eggs (1926) and The Heart of a Dog (1925), and Platonov’s Chevengur (1929) in different ways express the sense of the Revolution as an ontological change that has inaugurated new forms of human subjectivity. The Russian artistic avant-garde was marked by the shared belief that “art is a means of the organization of life and the creation of the New Man” (Heller 53). Even for those writers who opposed the emerging Soviet orthodoxy and were eventually purged, the response to the utopian promise of the Revolution was not identical to the response to the violent policies of the Soviet government. The case in point is Platonov, whose enigmatic Chevengur, brilliantly analyzed by Jameson in The Seeds of Time (1994), equates the pursuit of utopia with death, while at the same time re-imagining death as the ever-receding horizon of human desire.

The main concern of fantastic literature in the 1920s and early 1930s was the fluidity of the “human” and the permeable boundary between the individual body/self and the body politic. Bulgakov’s Heart of a Dog, a satirical variation on Frankenstein and The Island of Dr. Moreau in which a street mutt is surgically transformed into a rising proletarian star, is a case in point. Sharikov, its hero, is hardly a positive image of the New Man, yet like Dr. Moreau’s (m)animal subjects, he reflects the vertigo of self-remaking, in which the limits of humanity are violently breached.

As the Terror and its concomitant ideological campaigns intensified, sf became subject to policing, which severely limited its artistic options. The imaginative vigor of the 1920s faintly lingers on only in the fantasies of Alexander Belayev and Alexander Grin that are safely removed into an abstract “Western” setting. But compared to the artistic experimentation of the preceding decade, such sf as was allowed to exist between the late 1930s and early 1950s appears conservative and tame, a mildly fantastic version of the prescribed Socialist Realism. In fact, the difference between Socialist Realism and Socialist sf becomes negligible at that time. Many of the ostensibly “realistic” texts of Stalinism are unabashedly utopian, not only in the sense of painting a picture of life in the USSR that has nothing in common with the sordid and violent reality but also in their attempts to develop a new concept of character that reflects the ongoing project of creating the New Man. Sf, on the other hand, limited by the new critical doctrine of “close targeting,” sets its sights on the very near future. The result of this convergence is the creation of a shared literary world that masks the horror of the Gulag in two senses: covering it up and yet also outlining its contours as a mask outlines the contours of the face. This world is both tender and brutal, both paradigmatical and paranoid. The utopian novels of Grigory Adamov and the children’s fantasies of Arkady Gaidar are what might be called the idylls of the Terror.7

The war years and their immediate aftermath saw little sf. The death of Stalin, the Twentieth Party Congress, and the publication of Ivan Efremov’s Andromeda Nebula in 1957 are the events that inaugurated the blossoming of sf in the 1960s. The main task of 1960s sf, as of Soviet literature in general, remains the representation of the “new positive hero” forged by the “new system of social relations” (Heller 142). The sf of Efremov and the Strugatskys depicts the Soviet New Man in his finest hour, free from the crushing fear of
the Terror and the devastation of the war but not yet confronted with the economic and political failure of state socialism. But at the same time, theirs is a utopia on the verge of dissolution, eventually to be sapped by the twilight of the 1970s and 1980s, briefly reanimated by the feverish flicker of the perestroika, and finally sliding down into the darkness of historical forgetting.

Soviet sf was not unaware of its Western counterpart. The Iron Curtain was permeable both to Western ideas and Western goods. Cross-cultural intertextuality played a significant role in Soviet sf. The Strugatskys’ *Hard to be a God* (1964) is engaged in a dialogue with Alexander Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers*, Ivan Efremov’s “The Heart of the Serpent” (1963) with Murray Leinster’s “First Contact” (1945), and Efremov’s masterpiece *The Hour of the Bull* (1968) with David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920). Conversely, many Soviet sf texts, from *Andromeda Nebula* on, were translated into English and enjoyed a moderate success. But the mutual influence of the two kinds of sf was tempered by cultural misreading and mistranslation, which caused, for example, the Strugatskys’ *Hard to Be a God* to be read as routine sword-and-sorcery in the West, while Leinster’s Cold War tale was read by Efremov as a philosophical meditation on the forms of intelligent life. This cultural mistranslation exemplifies the subtle but profound difference between the Western human(ist) subject and the Soviet New Man.

The subject of Western sf lives in space, the Soviet New Man in time. The founders of various galactic empires disregard history altogether in pursuit of new frontiers, and this spatial dispersal of humanity, as Jameson argues, eventually leads to the “decentering” of the Western subject (“Postmodernism” 319). The Soviet New Man, on the other hand, marches along the one-way road of historical progress toward the revelation of his own glorious self. But this intimate connection to temporality leads to its own kind of “decentering,” for the subject never quite coincides with the ideal. And moreover, history itself suddenly deviates from its utopian route and loops around in strange and painful convolutions.

The history that gives birth to the New Man eventually becomes his nemesis. As the gap between Soviet ideology and the reality of its implementation becomes impossible to ignore, the New Man turns from a millenarian promise into an apocalyptic threat. And yet, at the same time, the New Man’s wrestling with history undermines what Tom Moylan calls “the instrumentalization of desire” (Moylan 28). Utopia comes back precisely at the point of its dissolution, but as an unfocused longing rather than as a bureaucratic blueprint.

**The Cosmic Body.** In Efremov’s “Cor Serpentis” (“The Heart of the Serpent” [1963]), a spaceship from the Communist Earth some millennia into the future meets its alien counterpart. This is a classic science-fiction situation, whose paradigmatic nature is emphasized by the characters’ discussion of Murray Leinster’s 1945 story “First Contact,” in which the humans and the aliens, in order to escape mutually assured annihilation, exchange their spaceships to avoid having “to kill or to be killed for strictly logical reasons” (155). Efremov’s revision of “First Contact” suggests another, and extremely odd,
logic of the interaction between the aliens and the humans. Instead of launching missiles, the two parties strip naked and parade in front of each other.

The rationale for this cosmic striptease is given in a long lecture on evolutionary convergence, which insists that rational beings must of necessity be human-like and that no “intelligent monsters” are possible (37). Thus, nudity acts as a validation of shared intelligence. The aliens and the humans are identical in their physical perfection, which is described in terms rather reminiscent of the eugenicist discourse that underpinned the muscle-bulging (male) and the wide-hipped (female) Nazi nudes. But despite their mutual attractions, human and alien bodies cannot touch: the aliens are fluorine breathers. The story ends with a suggestion by one of the human crew that the aliens’ genetic code be rewired so as to make them into oxygen breathers, with the view of subsequent sexual and reproductive mingling of the two races.

Despite their ostensible ideological opposition, both Efremov’s and Leinster’s tales are structured by exchange, which is embedded in, and enabled by, the matrix of similarity. But if for Leinster this similarity is mental (his aliens’ physique is not even described), for Efremov mental kinship must be underwritten by physical identity. The same inseparability of intelligence and human (and not merely humanoid) physical form is the crux of The Andromeda Nebula, in which the Great Ring of civilizations comprises exclusively human beings, since the Universe contains no others.

What is the connection between utopia—for both The Andromeda Nebula and “Cor Serpentis” are first and foremost utopias—and this cosmic anthropomorphism, which is characteristic of Soviet sf as a whole, though Efremov is its most articulate spokesman? Most run-of-the-mill Soviet sf simply takes the humanity of the cosmic Other for granted, as in, for example, Georgi Martynov’s Kallisto (1957), a pedestrian first-contact novel that eventually develops into an equally pedestrian utopia. It baldly states that there is nothing surprising about the fact of biological identity between the humans and the aliens and leaves it at that. Perhaps more surprising, or at least more revealing, is the fact that the aliens have black skin but Caucasian features, a slip of the pen betraying the incipient racism rife in the Soviet Union (Martynov 136). The notable exception is the Strugatskys, whose novels contain non-humanoid aliens; I will refer to this seeming paradox below. Here my concern is with the underlying ideological matrix of Efremov’s representation of the utopian body.

“Cor Serpentis” is based on the corporeal economy of the Same, epitomized by the symmetrical scene of looking, in which the four participants, a naked male and female on each side, gaze at each other across the transparent partition, substituting the identification of the Lacanian “mirror stage” for the Symbolic exchanges of verbal communication. The gaze in this scene cancels alterity through narcissistic doubling. The proposed exchange at the end—fluorine for oxygen—is meant to erase the last remaining difference, leading to the perfect equilibrium of endlessly proliferating simulacra.

Efremov’s world of the Same, however, is not devoid of the Other. Rather, it negates spatial difference by emphasizing a temporal one. Its locus of alterity is not another planet but another age. The uniformity of the human shape in
Efremov is produced by convergent evolution rather than by dispersal from a common point of origin, as in Ursula K. Le Guin’s HAINISH novels. The erasure of difference is not a restoration of some primordial unity but the end result of an historical process that begins with widely scattered and biologically diverse savage planets. This narrative inverts the story of the Fall in both its theological and Freudian incarnations: the pre-Oedipal bliss of sameness is situated at the end rather than the beginning of time.

Thus, time rather than space, assumes that priority which, according to Broderick’s definition of sf, is given to the unknown and the different over “the individuated, the comfortingly quotidian, the known” (Broderick 156). Efremov’s chiseled bodies trail dark evolutionary histories, every bit as threatening as the grotesque shapes of “intelligent monsters” in Western sf. The paean to the perfection of the human form in “Cor Serpentis” is preceded by a passionate denunciation of the horrors of biological evolution, with its blind, wasteful, and random cruelty. Similarly, the heroine of Efremov’s most mature novel The Hour of the Bull claims:

[O]nly man has the right to judge nature for the excessive suffering on the way to progress. The enormously long evolutionary process has so far managed neither to deliver the world from anguish nor to find the right way to happiness. If it is not overcome by intelligent beings, the ocean of pain will flood the planet until life’s final extinction…. (422)

Efremov’s image of temporality is what he calls “the arrow of Ahriman”—the tendency of nature and history to maximize suffering. But if the arrow of Ahriman unswervingly points to the inferno, how does the paradise of a humanist utopia come into being? Since any idea of a supernatural intervention is excluded, the humanist subject appears to be necessarily generated by the anti-humanist evolutionary process that is simultaneously random in its local adaptations and yet strictly teleological in that at the end it is bound to produce a perfect human body.

In Soviet sf this paradox goes by the name of dialectics—Hegel diluted by the grade-school doses of Marxism-Leninism. As Soviet utopias demonstrate, however, the core of the matter is ethical rather than philosophical or scientific. The New Men appoint themselves judges of time and history. And yet at the same time they derive their legitimacy from the very evolutionary process that they find morally abhorrent. Validated by (evolutionary) history, they stand at the pinnacle of the pyramid of life and denounce its teeming, predatory, suffering foundation. But if man indeed judges nature for its blind and rapacious contingency, why should the human body be seen as anything but a chancy conglomeration of parts? The suggestion of genetic engineering at the end of “Cor Serpentis” paves the way for the creation of “intelligent monsters,” just as it covertly assails the criterion of beauty that Efremov elevates into the foundation of his anthropology. If metabolism can be tinkered with, why not eyes, breasts, genitals?

This aporia, in which the arrow of Ahriman must somehow be bent into the Great Ring without losing its directionality, reflects the New Man’s double
relation to history. If, as Soviet ideology confidently promises, utopia is to arise out of the bloody chaos of class struggle, war, and state violence, it must be both the consummation and the negation of the historical process. The perfect body of the utopian subject, which simultaneously sums up and repudiates the evolutionary process that has brought it into being, is this paradox made flesh. The utopian subject finds his Other in his own history, whose signature is both invisible and ineradicable. The ideological fissures of utopian discourse generate the uncanny tableau of the naked men and women staring at each other across the gulf of space and by the mutual confirmation of their perfection, trying to allay the anxiety generated by another gulf, that of time. And perhaps the uncanniest aspect of this tableau is that it tries so hard to pass itself off as simple and natural.

**Women and Other Supermen.** In its anthropomorphism, Soviet science fiction neutralizes the Other (of history) by the Same (of the body). In its representation of gender it performs the opposite maneuver: it uses sexual difference to stabilize its definition of humanity.

The history of feminism in the Soviet Union is a complex and tangled issue, for while the Revolution proclaimed the complete equality of the sexes, the ingrained social attitudes and the conservative family policies of the Stalin era (approaching those of the Nazi paradigm) created a paradoxical reality of women’s full participation in the labor force while they remained burdened with the traditional domestic roles as well. The gender politics of the Soviet utopia seem, at first glance, simply to reflect this duality: women are, of course, present in the future Communist society and ostensibly equal, yet they mostly appear as the protagonists’ wives and girlfriends. A closer investigation reveals a far more paradoxical picture, however. Women may or may not take center stage, may or may not be represented in terms of gender stereotypes, may or may not be sexually liberated. But in whatever way each particular writer interprets the gender divide, the presence of this divide is inescapable. In other words, whatever form sexual difference takes (and it may even be weighted to the advantage of women), it is imperative that there be a difference. This is as true in the work of the female sf writers of the 1960s, such as Olga Larionova and Valentina Zhuravleva, as it is in that of their male counterparts. In Larionova’s *Leopard s vershiny Kilimandzharo* (*The Leopard on the Summit of the Kilimanjaro*, 1965), for example, the male protagonist is rather weak, while the two women who love him are strong and steadfast in the face of approaching death (the premise of the novel is that in the future Communist society it is possible, if one so chooses, to know the exact date of one’s demise). But the basic structure of the traditional romantic triangle is left undisturbed, while the women, despite their strength, closely correspond to the feminine stereotypes of the Snow Queen and the rebellious but loyal girl-child.

In the Strugatskys’ utopia *Noon, XXII Century (The Return)* (1966), the future Communist society is deliberately “unglamorous”: despite all the wonders of technology, the abolition of private property, and profound socio-economic transformations, the people are ordinary, even humdrum. One of the
stories in the Strugatskys’ novel, which is composed of independent episodes, is programmatically titled “Almost the Same” (as ourselves). When a twenty-first-century spaceman who has time-jumped into this utopia looks at his “great-grandchildren,” he is surprised to see “quite ordinary people. Middle-aged and young, tall and short, beautiful and plain. Men and women” (85). This “ordinariness” is emphasized in the representation of love. Couples court and marry in exactly the same way as educated Soviet men and women courted and married in the 1960s, with the same rituals of masculine pursuit, feminine bashfulness, and eventual friendly cohabitation, in which public references to sexuality are discreetly reduced to an occasional kiss. The pangs of unrequited love are rendered into the formula that a male character in another Strugatskys’ novel, Escape Attempt (1962), sums up as “I love a girl, the girl does not love me but likes me and treats me well” (28). Women as objects of desire are marginalized in order to maintain the equilibrium of homosocial friendships, while women as subjects of desire are simply absent.

What is peculiar about this persistence of traditional gender roles, however, is the fact that their main matrix, the family, has been dismantled. As in all Communist utopias, children from an early age are reared communally in the boarding schools. In another novel, Voikunski and Lukod’ianov’s The Surge of the Star Seas (Plesk zveznykh morei, 1967), where the emotional bond of marriage is emphasized, the parent-child bond is nevertheless extremely weak. Patriarchy has traditionally justified itself on the basis that motherhood is women’s “natural” burden. But in Soviet sf this burden is lifted and yet gender roles, rather than disappearing, seem to ossify.

The representation of women in Efremov’s work is at the opposite pole to that of the Strugatskys. Women characters are very prominent in The Andromeda Nebula where—unlike in the Strugatskys’—they are included in spaceship crews. And Efremov’s dystopia/utopia The Hour of the Bull, structured like Le Guin’s The Dispossessed by the opposition of two societies, may claim the title of one of the most feminist sf texts ever written, if feminism means delineation of strong and memorable female characters. It is the men in the novel who suffer from feminine “invisibility,” while the women, including the formidable commander of the space-faring expedition Fai Rodis, are both vivid and central to the plot. Romantic love is supplanted by erotic magnetism, which is represented with startling frankness and analyzed at equally startling length. But this magnetism, symbolized by the frequently invoked myth of Circe, is a product of biologically perfect femaleness, necessarily different from, and opposed to, biological maleness.

The plot of the novel confronts the utopian Earth (older than the Earth of The Andromeda Nebula) with the dystopian society of the human-populated planet Tormance, its name borrowed from David Lindsay’s allegorical fantasy A Voyage to Arcturus. Lindsay’s novel probes the metaphysical issue of suffering, which Efremov translates into social terms. Both, however, make a connection between pain and sexual difference. For Lindsay, sexuality is part of the spirit’s confinement in matter, which his protagonist longs to escape, only to find himself locked in a vicious circle of sexual attraction and repulsion.
Efremov’s logic of sex is equally circular, for while insisting that sexual difference as conceptualized in capitalist societies is painful and perverse, he can oppose it only with more of the same. The social inferno of his Tormance generates the sadomasochistic dynamics of male domination and female submission, while the utopia of Earth creates the ostensibly free and equal Eros. But this utopia is in no sense matriarchal; rather it empowers women by making them “better” men than men themselves. And this empowerment takes the form of phantasmagoric corporeal exchanges, in which the New Woman is equated with the phalasm of the phallic mother.

The phallic mother in Freud is a fantasy created by the masculine fear of castration, which endows women with an imaginary phallus in order not to be confronted with the disturbing “absence” of their genitalia. Deploying the image of the phallic mother, in other words, is a way to preserve the binary of male/female by creating phantasmagoric bodies that unite the poles of this dichotomy without questioning or undermining it. In Lindsay’s novel, for example, there is a character called Oceaxe, who combines the “bold, masterful, masculine egotism of manner” with “the fascinating and disturbing femininity of her voice” (88). It turns out that Oceaxe, a fantastic femme fatale, “absorbs” weak males, symbolically stealing their phalluses. Efremov’s women also seem to have “absorbed” their pale masculine counterparts. Their Circe-like power has a dark, disturbing aspect, evident in the fact that its exercise upon males of Tormance invariably results in outbreaks of violence and suicide. Not only the sexual power but even the physique of Efremov’s women is informed by a fantasy of gender plenitude that recuperates sexual difference in the very act of apparent escape from it. Before the landing on Tormance, for example, the cosmonauts seal themselves in metal shells that cling as close as a second skin. Their heads are unprotected, so the shells are useless as bacterial filters (their ostensible purpose). Instead, they wrap the body in a shining metal film, which is proof against “knife, bullet, and heat ray, and sexual penetration (107, 191). Even though both men and women wear the shells, the metallic bodies that are described in lavish detail are exclusively female. This utopian femaleness, hard, impregnable, alluring but unapproachable, always erect, is the phallic mother made flesh.

And if women are transformed into steely walking phalluses, men display traditionally feminine characteristics. When Rodis suggests that a male of Tormance be taken to the Earth spaceship and remade in the utopian mold, taught “how to control [his own] body and feelings and how to subdue others, if necessary,” the chosen man refuses, preferring to dedicate himself to “kindness, love, charity, and care of others,” all traditional feminine tasks (303). Even when men are violent, their violence is represented as a result of weakness. When an Earth woman is wounded by a Tormance man, he immediately turns his knife upon himself. And it is not only the damaged Tormance males but also their utopian counterparts that are more emotional and impulsive than women. In The Andromeda Nebula, for example, the scientist Mwen Mass, swayed by his uncontrollable attraction to a lovely alien female seen on the screens of the Great Ring’s communication device, conducts a rash
and dangerous experiment that results in the deaths of several people. He is redeemed by two strong and steadfast women, his lover Chara Nandi and his friend Evda Nal.

Such reversals may seem very appealing when opposed to the weak or absent women characters of other Soviet utopias, but they are equally caught in the binary logic of gender. Efremov’s utopia inverts misogyny without transcending it. If the phallic mother is a sort of female man, to appropriate Joanna Russ’s expression, her counterpart is a male woman. But in whatever way the gender attributes of masculinity and femininity are shifted around, gender itself is never questioned as the necessary and sufficient characteristic of a human being. Efremov’s muscular heroines and the Strugatskys’ wilting wives are two sides of the same coin. Both are images of gender as the inescapable “matrix” of humanity.

Judith Butler claims that “the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the ‘human’” (7), and Soviet utopian science fiction provides a stunning illustration of this thesis. Whether misogynist or quasi-feminist, the New Man strives hard to preserve his humanity against the corrosive forces of history that both bring him into being and constantly threaten to turn him into something “new and strange.” Sexual difference is a major way to keep humanity in place by hitching it to the grid of gender. Hierarchy of the sexes is less important than their difference since this difference is what assures the survival of the human subject. But Soviet utopia absolutely excludes “a sexual economy … founded on sexual indeterminacy rather than sexual difference” (Hurley 213). Soviet sf of the 1960s is neither necessarily prudish nor conservative; it can imagine alternative social roles for men and women but it cannot make sexual difference itself a subject of “estrangement,” “exploring and questioning the ways in which ‘woman’ and ‘man’ are literally, and literally, constructed within society” (Broderick 55). And the reason for this incapacity is the insistence on the New Man’s humanity. In The Surge of the Star Seas, for example, the future Communist society is in turmoil when it appears that the colonists on Venus deviate from the human norm. The conflict is symbolically resolved when the protagonist, named Ulysses, returns to the bosom of his Venusian family, finding in the traditional gender roles reconfirmation of his own and other colonists’ essential humanity. The mother’s embrace validates the New Man’s manhood, even if the mother in question is phallic.

The Other. The inscription of gender in Soviet science fiction encapsulates its general dynamics: the more it changes, the more it remains the same. Utopia, like Alice in Wonderland, rushes forward in order to remain in place. At the end of Noon, XXII Century one of the characters imagines history as a spiral that inevitably turns in upon itself: “Man began with Communism and returns to Communism” (318). Symptomatically, the novel is subtitled Return. Efremov’s Great Ring is another image of this energetic stasis.
But history refuses to stand still, as the dramatic history of the USSR itself cogently demonstrates. Soviet sf conveys the subject’s increasing alienation from temporality through the recurring images of monsters out of time.

In *The Hour of the Bull* an ancient spaceship populated by a masked crew of the dead, a Galactic *Flying Dutchman*, passes close to Tormance. The episode of this ship, whose shrieking passage through the darkness of space fills the human observers with “unaccountable revulsion,” is unconnected to the plot: it intrudes into the utopian/dystopian dialogue like a phrase in an alien tongue, meaningless and yet signifying another, and unreachable, horizon of meaning (296). It is the only point in the book at which both Earth and Tormance characters react to the events in exactly the same way, with depression and anxiety, momentarily united by the common “resistance to this inhuman” (Lyotard 7).

Jean-François Lyotard distinguishes between “two sorts of inhuman”—of history and of the psyche, the “inhumanity of the system” and “the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage” (2). Sf often uses these two interchangeably, as metaphors for each other. Efremov’s alien spaceship stirs the common sediment of atavistic fears in the souls of those who witness its passage. But the most impressive image of the connection between the “two sorts of inhuman” is the evolution of the alien Wanderers in the Strugatskys’ oeuvre. Like Efremov’s spaceship, the Wanderers come from outer space, develop into a symbol of history, and end up lodged at the core of the utopian subject, becoming the “nonhuman [that is] located within humanity” (Rose 33).

A mysterious race that leaves its artifacts on dozens of planets but is never encountered face to face, the Wanderers first appear in *Afternoon, XXII Century* as a jarring note in the novel’s bland symphony of utopian boredom. In one of the stories that comprise the novel, the space explorer Gorbovskii warns against the shock and humiliation of meeting a truly alien intelligence. Echoing Stanislaw Lem’s preoccupation in *Solaris* with the cognitive and moral limits of Nietzsche’s “human, all too human,” Gorbovskii muses on the mutual incomprehensibility of different kinds of intelligence. His interlocutor consoles himself with the thought that if the totally Other exists, it will be outside the human cognitive universe and thus irrelevant to it. It turns out, however, that like the living ocean of *Solaris*, the alien Wanderers meddle with humanity: Gorbovskii himself is implanted with their transmitter.

The Wanderers’ influence grows throughout the Strugatskys’ oeuvre, culminating in two late novels, *Beetle in the Anthill* (1979-80) and *The Waves Still the Wind* (1985-86). From an epistemological quandary the Wanderers become a moral one, shifting from the indifferent complexity of what Lyotard calls “a cosmological chance” (7) to the alienating complexity of history. Already in *Escape Attempt* (1965) the Wanderers are deployed as a metaphor for the forbidden subject of genocide. In the novel a Soviet World War II POW, Saul, escapes into the Communist future and goes on an interstellar jaunt with two young men. They discover a human-populated planet dotted with concentration camps, whose brutish masters use the never-ending stream of strange machines left behind by the Wanderers to torture and kill the camps’
inmates. Saul tries and fails to stop the machines and then returns to his own time and dies heroically in a battle with Nazis. “History,” he says. “Nothing can be stopped” (118). History in the novel becomes not the spiral of humanism but an alien stream that sweeps its helpless subjects towards mass graves and the crematorium.

In the Strugatskys’ masterpiece Roadside Picnic (1972), the aliens (not named as the Wanderers but resembling them in their mysteriousness) land on Earth and lift off again, leaving behind a scatter of incomprehensible and highly dangerous artifacts in six sharply defined Zones. The novel is concerned with human reactions to this cosmic event, and especially with the culture of smuggling and exploitation that develops around the Zones. It ends ambiguously, with the protagonist, Red Schuchart, penetrating deep into the Zone to face the mythic Golden Ball, which is supposed to grant all wishes. Precisely as he cries out, “HAPPINESS FOR EVERYBODY, FREE, AND NO ONE WILL GO AWAY UNSATISFIED!” the narrative stops (152). Stanislaw Lem, in his analysis of Roadside Picnic, claims the aliens represent the cosmic “inhuman,” whose opacity to the human intellect results from the fact that nature is incomprehensible with our culturally contingent attempts to understand it (244-51). Fredric Jameson, on the other hand, sees in the novel’s ending “the unexpected emergence, as it were, beyond ‘the nightmare of History’ and from out of the most archaic longings of the human race, of the impossible and inexplicable Utopian impulse here none the less briefly glimpsed” (“Progress Versus Utopia” 157). These two readings are not mutually exclusive: they suggest a metaphorical connection between the opacity of nature and “the nightmare of history.”

The Zone in the novel is a place of horrors, whose alien artifacts seem to have no other function than mutilating the human body in a variety of highly imaginative ways. Lem’s epistemological reading cannot explain the contradiction between the indifference of the alien intelligence and the malice of its gifts. A key to this contradiction lies in the word “zone,” one of the most loaded ones in the Soviet vocabulary, a slang name for the Gulag universe. The alien Zone is the locus of history that turns unruly and perverse, delivering concentration camps instead of the promised paradise.

In the Strugatskys’ novels written close to the end of the Soviet Union, the “political unconscious” of their earlier utopias is laid bare. The Wanderers are now clearly linked to the creation of the utopian subject, a project that is condemned as dangerous and futile. In Beetle in the Anthill (1979), the Wanderers attempt to interfere in human evolution, leaving a “gift” of fertilized ova, which develop into specially endowed children. When one of these children is about to come into his superhuman inheritance, he is killed by a Special Service agent, who justifies the murder by the necessity to safeguard the humanity of Communist society. But such desperate means only underline the failure of the New Man, the failure that at this point is evident to the Soviet intelligentsia, even as the USSR still clings to the old slogans that now ring increasingly hollow.
In the sequel to the novel *The Waves Still the Wind* (1985), all attempts to veil the horror of history by cosmic metaphors are dropped. The inhuman is firmly placed within humanity. The supermen are now revealed to be the natural result of human evolution and there are hints that the Wanderers themselves are no aliens but “ludens,” the Strugatskys’s term for New Men, punning on the Russian word for “people.” The inhuman is a product of history, as time, instead of preserving humanity, inexorably leads it away from itself, generating self-alienation and self-difference.

The aporia of the Soviet utopia inscribes the contradiction between the static opposition of human/inhuman and the dynamic continuity of human-as-inhuman, between historical teleology and evolutionary open-endedness, between progress and contingency. Lyotard describes this contradiction as that between a “mythic” and a “modern” concept of diachrony. In the mythic concept the ending is predetermined and “human beings have as their only task that of unfolding identities already constituted in synchrony or achrony” (67). “Modernity,” on the other hand, is “a way of shaping a sequence of moments in such a way that it accepts a high rate of contingency” (68). The Soviet utopia is caught in a double bind: by accepting “the contingency and freedom proper to the human project,” it runs the risk of achieving results opposite to its humanist ethos (Lyotard 69). But this central contradiction of modernity turns into a particularly ugly paradox in the USSR, as the Zone graphically demonstrates what horrors history can deliver when it runs out of control.

**The Enemy.** The only acceptable venue for representing mass violence in Soviet science fiction of the 1960s (as in much of Soviet popular literature in general) was World War II, or the Great Patriotic War, just as the true enemy, the one whose negative representation was underpinned by real passion, was the fascist, the Nazi *Ubermensch*. Fascism, rather than faceless capitalism, was hated with a vengeance and during the Cold War America and its allies were often labeled “fascists.” Most Soviet dystopias take fascism and Nazism as their starting point, depicting either the survival of a Nazi enclave or, more often, constructing imaginary societies based on the Nazi model.

The irony, of course, lies in the fact that both Communism and fascism in its many varieties (including Nazism) are ideologies of the New Man. Their models for the utopian subject are different, leading to frequent misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the Nazi in Soviet literature. Referring to the image of “the fascist” in the USSR, Russian scholar Mikhail Ryklin writes: “The two totalitarian systems turned out to be totally opaque to each other, since the direction and logic of terror was completely different in each case” (815). Especially during the Great Terror, however, there was a noticeable *rapprochement* between the Soviet New Man and what the scholar of the psycho-dynamics of fascism Klaus Theweleit calls the Nazi “man of steel.” Stalin deliberately chose a name for himself which is derived from the Russian word for “steel” (Stalin’s real name is Dzhugashvili; “Stalin” is a nom de guerre).
The utopias of the 1960s, written after the disclosure of Stalin’s atrocities, are generally at pains to oppose the sadistic, cold-blooded, and arrogant violence of the Ubermensch to the humanism of the Soviet subject. Occasionally this opposition collapses, however, and the two New Men are revealed as two different modalities of the same utopian subject.

Sever Gansovky’s story “Demon of History” (1966) suggests that the horrors of the Holocaust are intrinsic to the fabric of history, which in accordance with the Marxist view is represented as guided by ineluctable laws. But these laws are demonic rather than providential, and the final destination of progress is not a utopia but a mass grave. The protagonist of the story travels back in time to assassinate a nameless dictator who has built death camps and killing fields, only to find out on his return that he has inadvertently enabled the rise of Hitler and the existence of Auschwitz and Treblinka. The dictator, Hitler’s alter ego, is referred to as the Father of the Nation, a cognomen resonating with Stalin’s titles. The tragic tenor of the story, borrowing from Thomas Mann’s Doctor Faustus, reflects the disillusionment of the Soviet intelligentsia who were beginning to realize that the Great Patriotic War was not a fight between good and evil but a clash of two bloody tyrants.

I have already referred to a similar covert conflation between Nazism and Stalinism in the Strugatsky’s Escape Attempt, where the concentration camp common to both regimes functions as the “repressed” of utopia. In their Beetle in the Anthill, the would-be superman Lev Obalkin’s obsession with power and manipulation also suggests the Ubermensch. But it is Efremov’s eugenically perfect Earthmen in The Hour of the Bull who most uncannily resemble their Nazi counterparts, all the more uncannily because this resemblance is clearly unintentional.

Their flawless bodies clad in steel, their minds filled with images of “Indo-Aryan” mythology, Fai Rodis and her crew strut among the vaguely “Asiatic” inhabitants of Torrance like the fulfillment of an S.S. wet dream. They talk of “degeneration,” while the cowed natives worship their “inhuman” beauty (157). When the ruler of Torrance asks Rodis to bear him a superhuman child, she contemptuously refuses, explaining that the appearance of a superman in a fallen society would only create more suffering (322). But from Efremov’s point of view this does not constitute racism. There is no racism on Communist Earth because there are no races: all diversity has been abolished, all physical and mental difference deliberately reduced to fit one godlike type, the male with the “wide shoulders of the fighter and the builder” and the female with the “wide hips” of the mother of the race (“Cor Serpentis” 64).

In presenting this eugenicist utopia, Efremov deviated from the Soviet consensus sufficiently to have The Hour of the Bull encounter some official displeasure. Soviet ideology, as opposed to Nazism, was based on “nurture” rather than “nature” and had a strong Lamarckian element, evident in the deified status of the quack biologist Trofim Lysenko during the Stalinist period. The so-called “school of Efremov” in the 1980s magnified these quasi-Nazi elements in the master’s heritage into a full-blown rightist and nationalist ideology. But there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Efremov’s own
Communist commitment. The biological superiority of the New Man in *The Andromeda Nebula* and *The Hour of the Bull* is the result of the in-built tension between humanism and perfectionism, between history and utopia, in Soviet ideology itself. The temptation of eugenics, in both its positive (bio-engineering) and negative (extermination) varieties, is inescapably present in the structure of the Soviet subject, as Bulgakov presciently recognized in *The Heart of a Dog*. The inhuman beauty of Efremov’s protagonists is the obverse side of the inhumanity of the camps. And there is a bitter irony in this Siamese pairing for the society whose collective identity was largely based on the victory over Nazism. We have defeated the enemy only to discover that it is ourselves.

**The Ends of Man.** Thus, the humanist ethos of Soviet sf evolves into its own posthumanity. This is the central—and unresolvable—paradox of Soviet sf, predicated on the mutual split, and mutual interdependence, of history and utopia. To preserve his fragile humanity, the subject of Soviet sf embarks on a hopeless battle against time. The ultimate Other is neither the phantom capitalist, after all, nor the spookily familiar *Urmensch*, but temporality itself. In *The Andromeda Nebula* the goal of Mwen Mass’s heroic experiment is to avenge the countless wasted generations, whose lost lives demand a “battle with time” (149). And in *The Hour of the Bull*, the dark “roots of the universe” that are encountered on the boundary of ordinary space-time are associated with the pervasive, almost obsessive, images of war and atrocity (51). The splendor of the utopian achievement is precariously floating on the dark tide of history, symbolized by the twin images of the “arrow of Ahriman” and the “inferno,” the self-perpetuating social hell.

But if history is hell, how can utopia come into being? The ruler of Tormance asks Rodis: “How could it happen that the ravished, robbed planet turned into a marvelous garden, and its savage, faithless inhabitants—into loving friends?” (175). And to this question neither Soviet sf nor Soviet history can provide any answer.

The story of the New Man is yet to be written: this essay provides only a snapshot. But what even this brief look indicates is that utopia contains the seeds of its own downfall. Its subject cannot be squeezed into an immutable matrix, whether of Soviet humanism or of Nazi bio-transcendence. As Nietzsche pointed out, the New Man is a process rather than a goal, open-ended and contingent, borne away on the tide of history, which cannot be arbitrarily dammed when the desired state is achieved. History, in the words of Saul in the Strugatskys’ *Escape Attempt*, cannot be stopped. The inhuman, inside and outside the psyche, is the foundation of humanity.

But the flux of history also contains the seeds of utopia’s regeneration. Jameson’s distinction between the static utopia and what he calls “the utopian impulse”, elaborated by Tom Moylan, Krishan Kumar, and others, suggests that the roots of utopia lie in the desire for “something else,” which transcends its instrumentalization in the normative schemes of a brave new world. The posthuman terminal identities of sf are less important as blueprints for the future than as indicators of dissatisfaction with the present. And this dissatisfaction
links the half-forgotten Soviet New Men with their cybernetic successors. The unraveling of the New Man, documented by those very texts that attempted to represent his triumph, testifies to the survival of the utopian impulse even in the prison-house of the Soviet institutional utopia. This is not a simple matter of resistance to the regime. Rather, it is the self-unraveling of an ideology confronted with its own inner paradoxes, of a humanism that ushers in its own negation. The End of Man in Soviet science fiction illustrates Jameson's paradox of the utopian death-wish: "Utopia is ... anonymity as an intensely positive force, as the most fundamental fact of life of the democratic community; and it is this anonymity that in our non- or pre-Utopian world goes by the name of death " (Seeds of Time 128).

Utopia, then, is not any specific image of perfection but rather the dissolution of all such images in the acid of desire. The death of utopia liberates the imagination to conceive of alternatives to normative identity that are not bound by the dichotomies of old/new, male/female, or human/posthuman. Perhaps the truly utopian images in the texts I have discussed are not the eugenically perfect New Men and the steel-clad superwomen but the faceless Wanderers, the darkness of space, and the vertigo of time, in which names and identities blur and dissipate. These images indicate that the utopian subject is neither the humanist One nor the postmodern Many but rather that very temporal process that both creates and undermines all modalities of human subjectivity. Paradoxically, the only path to utopia is pointed at by the arrow of Ahriman.

NOTES

1. All early-twentieth-century radical ideologies, whether "left" or "right," shared the utopian dream of the New Man that Žižek describes as "man as harmonious being ... a New Man without antagonistic tension" (5). Both Nazism and Communism aimed for an anthropological revolution, or what the French fascist thinker Drieu La Rochelle called "the revolution of the body." Spurred by late-nineteenth-century evolutionary thought, the desire for a perfect society was transmuted into the longing for perfected man. The endlessly reiterated goal of Nazism was the birth of the new subject of history, which Otto Strasser, one of the völkisch ideologues, calls "the new type of human being" (qtd. in Griffin 115). A similar rhetoric, with a similar biological emphasis, was part of Soviet discourse, especially in the 1920s, the main difference being that it emphasized the Lamarckian flexibility of heredity. Aron Zalkind, a prolific and popular political writer of that period, claimed in Pedologia that proletarians are genetically predisposed to correct philosophical thinking. But even apart from such extreme cases, the creation of the New Soviet Man was a professed goal of the Soviet State and Žižek's discussion of this new ideological subject applies both to fascism, in its many varieties, and to Communism. See also Griffin and Theweleit for analyses of the fascist New Man.

2. The New Man of both Nazism and Communism is of course a man, so the masculine pronoun is fully warranted. Below I will discuss the relationship of the utopian subject to gender.

3. I deliberately disregard the extratextual political background of the writers I discuss, such as the presumed degree of their compliance with the regime, the rivalry between Ivan Efremov and the Strugatskys, and the latter's dissident gestures. Nor will I discuss the rise in the 1980s of the so-called "Efremov school" of sf, which comprised
hacks with frankly neo-fascist and conservative political agendas, even though the question of the relationship between their overt ideological platform and the intrinsic ideological structure of Efremov’s texts is fascinating. Such political background is undoubtedly important for a comprehensive study of Soviet sf. But my goal here is not only narrower but altogether different: to study the intrinsic utopian “ideology of the form” of the genre at mid-century with regard to its delineation of the human subject.

4. All the Russian titles and quotations are in my translation, unless otherwise noted. Transliteration is according to the US Library of Congress system.

5. A similar assertion is made in Heller, one of the first comprehensive studies of Soviet sf published before the collapse of the USSR.

6. Post-Soviet sf writer Vyacheslav Rybakov wrote a parody of Efremov’s *The Andromeda Nebula* titled *Proschanie slavyanki s mechtoy* (roughly meaning *Farewell to a Dream*, 1991), which is a bitter reckoning with the failed Soviet utopia. Nevertheless, the work is dedicated to Efremov, whose belief in the possibility of a qualitatively different future is regarded with a mixture of nostalgia and cynicism.

7. Adamov wrote three science-fiction novels dealing with the “conquest” of Nature hindered by perfidious enemies-in-disguise that perfectly reflect Stalinism’s combination of romanticism and paranoia. The novels are *Pobediyeli nedr* (*The Conquerors of the Interior*, 1937), *Taina dvuch okeanov* (*The Mystery of Two Oceans*, 1939), and *Izgnaniye vladyki* (*Exile of the King*, 1941-46).

8. This, of course, intensified the writers’ mutual animosity; Arkady Strugatsky claims that *The Return* was written as a polemical response to Efremov’s *Andromeda Nebula*, which the brothers felt “lacked “people” (qtd. in Revich 246).

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ABSTRACT
This essay deals with the representation of the New Man in Soviet sf. The New Man is the ideal subject whose creation was one of the central goals of Soviet civilization. Soviet sf reflects the ideological paradox underlying his aborted birth: the New Man was supposed to come into being as the culmination of the historical process and, at the same time, to negate the contingency and violence of history. The article focuses on the articulation of this paradox in the canonical works of Ivan Efremov and the Strugatsky brothers and analyzes such aspects of the New Man as anthropomorphism, gender, violence, and relation to the Other.