

Reflection Statement

The primary intent of my major work, *Science in a Smoke-filled Room*, is to investigate the significance of Russian brothers and authors Boris and Arkady Strugatsky in developing and extending the science-fiction genre in the Soviet Union in the mid-twentieth century. I was especially interested in one of their seminal early works, a short-story collective *Noon: 22nd Century* (1962) which depicted a utopian world two centuries into the future, but, like so much science-fiction, reflected the communist values and socio-economic world from which it emerged. This text is overtly political from Western eyes as it speculates about the possibilities for humanity if society was governed by a benevolent, technologically advanced communist state which served its people rather than suffocated them. George Orwell said he wanted 'to make political writing into an art'¹ and I believe this is what the Strugatsky brothers have achieved in this and their later works. Boris and Arkady Strugatsky wrote in a climate of censorship, initially following the repressive regime of Joseph Stalin (1928 - 1953) and his policy of 'Social Realism' (1934), and then later during the more liberal, but still

¹ Orwell, G. 1946. *Why I Write*. Britain: Gangrel

narrow boundaries of his successor Nikita Khrushchev. To capture this overtly political subtext in *Noon: 22nd Century* I entitled my major work *Science in a smoke-filled room* – a popular American colloquialism, synonymous with secret political meetings or agreements.

I believe my elected area of investigation, Soviet sci-fi, offers an insight into a foreign literary context which is original and unique in our Western world – which often is naïve to the ideas presented in Eastern literature, and unaware of the genesis of any other literature bar their own.

My area of investigation links to my study of the science-fiction genre in the Extension 1 English course, but it also comes from a personal fascination to learn more about Soviet science-fiction. From the beginning of my research I found there were significant similarities between Soviet sci-fi and the much better known Western science-fiction texts, and, most interestingly, while we represented the Russians as the aliens, they were viewing us in the same way.

Writing from a contemporary Western perspective, I began research into a vast array of Soviet sci-fi to gain some understanding of its unique nature and purpose. I read the influential novel *We* (1921) by Yevgeny Zamyatin and viewed the short-film *The Gift* (2010) by Erik Rinsch to gain a sense of the growth of the genre in Russia in various mediums. An article *War of the Worlds: who owns the political soul of science-fiction?*², allowed an insight not only into the development of Russian sci-fi, but also into the ideological ‘battle’ between Western and Eastern sci-fi. Further investigation led me to an article published by Alexandr

² Roberts, A. (2013). *War of the Worlds: who owns the political soul of science fiction?*. Australia: The Guardian

Usov³ which revealed that the Strugatsky brothers works' 'have educated entire generations' and that the key to their success was, according to their own description, that they wrote about 'adventures of the spirit, and not about adventures of the body'.

Further research from a scholarly thesis, *The Contribution of The Brothers Strugatsky to The Genre of Russian Science-Fiction*⁴, revealed that *Noon: 22nd Century* was a pioneering text written in the post-Stalinist era, when the arts became viewed through a new lens of freedom of ideas – contrary to Stalin's policy of Socialist Realism (1934) which had constrained experimental literature. This, and a reading *Science-Fiction Studies*⁵ was highly influential in my work because I gained a better understanding of the significance of the brothers' work in its 1960s Soviet context, and formulated the basis of my thesis: '*Noon: 22nd Century* was a prolific step toward 'liberating literature in the USSR from the stranglehold of socialist realism and returning it to the mainstream tradition of Russian social and philosophical thought...' (Major work, p. 7)

I furthered my insight into the specific literary and social world of the brothers with readings such as *Russia – Society and Culture in the 1920s Foreign Policy 1921 – 28*⁶ and *Soviet Union Timeline*⁷, which enlightened my understanding of specifically how the Strugatsky Brothers challenged and supported aspects of their Communist society.

³ Usov, A. (2014), *Brothers Strugatsky*, Russia: Russian Sci-Fi. <http://rusf.ru/abs/english/>. [Accessed 13 June 14]

⁴ Kulikova, Y. (2011). *The Contribution of the Brothers Strugatsky to The Genre of Russian Science Fiction*, USA: University of Oregon.

⁵ Gerould, D. *Science Fiction Studies*, USA: Science Fiction Studies.

⁶ Mongabay.com. (2014), *Russia – Society and Culture in the 1920s Foreign Policy 1921 – 28*. USA: Mongabay.com. <http://www.mongabay.com/history/russia/russia-society-and-culture-in-the-1920s-foreign-policy-1921-28.html>

⁷ Real USSR. (2014), *Soviet Union Timeline*. USA: Real USSR. <http://www.realussr.com/soviet-union-timeline/>

Most significant in the development of my arguments, was a consolidation of knowledge from *The Contribution of The Brothers Strugatsky to The Genre of Russian Science Fiction*, Theodore Sturgeon's⁸ *Foreword* and Rosalind Marsh's reading *Soviet Science Fiction: Science, Politics and Literature*⁹. I found based on this investigation that the Strugatsky Brothers' sci-fi specifically promoted free-thought, liberality, fairness and Communism in an effort to combat its Western counterpart, and to diverge from Stalin's literary constriction. These ideas became the focus of my investigation: '*Noon: 22nd Century (1962)* is the brothers' best example of Soviet sci-fi during the late 1950s and early 1960s; its effort to return the genre to its prior intellectualism, and its attempt to idealise communism in the context of the Cold War.' (p. 5, Major Work)

This investigation and readings which supported my thesis such as *Political theory, science fiction, and utopian literature*¹⁰ and *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction: Russia*¹¹ further influenced my work in concluding that the brothers' contribution to Soviet literature was monumental – a judgement reflected in their value as 'the spiritual leaders' of science fiction in Russia.¹²

To allow audiences to effectively connect with the unfamiliar realities of 1960s Russia, I selected complementary visuals to provide a more complete picture of the brothers' lives and their context, as well as illustrating, literally, the universal visual nature of sci-fi as a genre.

⁸ Sturgeon, T. (1962). *Noon: 22nd Century*, Russia: Macmillan

⁹ Marsh, R. (1986). *Soviet Science Fiction Since Stalin: Science, Politics and Literature*.

¹⁰ Burns, T. (2010). *Political theory, science fiction, and utopian literature*, USA: Lexington Books

¹¹ The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction. (2011), *Russia*, USA: Gollancz. <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/russia#sthash.SdHjEOEn.dpuf>. [Accessed 24 June 14]

¹² Geldern, J.. 2014. *Seventeen Moments In Soviet History*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://soviethistory.macalester.edu/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1968strugatsky&Year=1968>. [Accessed 07 August 14].

I selected a critical response as it fosters my personal preference for textual deconstruction and is appropriate for the complex ideas inherent *Noon:22nd Century* and the sci-fi genre. I researched the form and *Critical Responses*¹³, allowed me to understand the language conventions and structural frameworks appropriate to intellectual pieces of writing. I located *Academic Writing*¹⁴, a practical guide which explores the conventions of academic discussion, and assisted stylistically with the tone of my response. For example, its suggestion that tone within analytical pieces should be ‘cool, analytical, objective, intellectual, rational’ influenced my use of the objective third person:

‘This work will explore how the Strugatsky Brothers contributed to Russian sci-fi through their text *Noon 22nd Century*, and returned the genre to its pre-Stalin roots in critical thinking and intellectualism.’ (Major work, p. 1).

The complex web of Russian society and culture which forms the base of my investigation into *Noon: 22nd Century* however prompted further study into the construction of clearer responses. In this endeavour, I located scholarly readings such as *Beyond Linearity: Writing the Segmented Essay*¹⁵ and *Picturing the Personal Essay*¹⁶ which suggested ‘segmented essays...are...organic with the subject’¹⁷, and catalysed my decision to ‘segment’ my critical response into six distinct sections.

My critical response is intended for an academic, scholarly audience particularly interested in Russian science-fiction, genre theory or the contributions made by

¹³ Landay, L. (2013), *Critical Responses*, USA: (publisher not given)

¹⁴ Ventola, E. Mauranen, A. (1996) *Academic Writing*, Netherlands/North America: John Benjamins Publishing Company

¹⁵ Root, L. R. (2009). *Beyond Linearity: Writing the Segmented Essay*, p. 1. USA: Publisher not given.

¹⁶ Bascom, T. (2012). *Picturing the Personal Essay*, USA: Creative Nonfiction (publisher), <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/picturing-personal-essay-visual-guide> [webpage].

¹⁷ Root, L. R. *op. cit.*

Boris and Arkady Strugatsky to the contemporary literary corpus. On a broader scale, my work is intended for a Western audience interested in sci-fi in a foreign context and particularly the representation of communism as a utopian society.

The 'genre' unit within the HSC Extension 1 English course was crucial in shaping my critical response, allowing me research into the persuasive nature of genre, and most specifically the Marxist ideas of genre relevant to *Noon: 22nd Century*. Of most prominent assistance to the development of my work was the extension of knowledge provided by Daniel Chandler's reading *An Introduction To Genre Theory*¹⁸, which imparted the understanding that genre can be seeded with ideological didacticism. For example:

'Audiences embraced this 'fresh' genre which was distinctively seeded with a range of social and political commentaries, and novels such as *The Decline of Mars* by Aleksei Tolstoy¹⁹ which promoted political utopianism on Mars, captured audiences with their 'didactic nature' (Major work, p. 1)

Hayward's idea that a genre often works to establish 'different world views' heightened this idea that genre is inherently didactic. Thus, a further aim of my work is to subvert the notion that genre is merely 'family resemblances'²⁰, and to explore exactly how the Strugatsky Brothers utilise the didacticism of genre to return Soviet sci-fi to its intellectual rigours.

The Extension 2 English course has been somewhat of a passion for me, as I have had the opportunity to investigate a fascinating, previously unfamiliar area of study – Russia sci-fi. Extrapolating the contribution of such prolific authors was an engaging process, as their unique text and contexts were innately captivating.

¹⁸ Chandler, D. (1994), *Introduction to Genre Theory*, Australia: (publisher not given)

¹⁹ Tolstoy, A. (1923), *Aelita*, Russia: Foreign Languages Publishing House

²⁰ Wittgenstein, L. *Introduction to Genre Theory*, Australia: publisher not given.

I am confident that my investigation will similarly engage audiences, as they discover that sci-fi can be more than its superficial discourse – it can be a revolutionary effort to instigate changes in thought and in genre.

‘Thinking is not entertainment, but an obligation’ – Boris and Arkady Strugatsky

Acknowledgements

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