

Science Fiction Author Boris Strugatskij

WES KELLY, TRITON SYSTEMS, LLC

In the Russian Community bi-weekly [newspaper](#) *Nash Texas*, Russian for *Our Texas*, serving much of the state, an article appeared noting the passing of a significant Russian cultural figure, one of the many icons of a generation or two, but also, significantly, an icon of those who have participated in international space flight. What follows is a fairly literal translation of the text, interspersing some of the accolades (italics) from prominent Russians that had originally appeared at the end of the article.

The Death of Boris Strugatskij Reported 29 November 2012

On 19 November in the Almazov Hospital in St. Petersburg expired Boris Strugatskij, a legend of Soviet and Russian science fiction (“fantastika”). He was 79 years old. Together from their very first appearance the Brothers Strugatskij, a writing duet, more than many others influenced the generation of the 1960s to 80s.

Yurij Arabov, screenwriter says, “It is simply not adequate to say that two classical (artists) have left us. The Strugatskijs in my opinion were the best subjectivists of our 20th century literature, if, under a subject, it’s necessary to understand not only the content of events, but also the intent of what is said. Their subjects are absolutely brilliant. For example, ‘Monday Begins on Saturday’ in 1964. We grew up with that literature. Boris is gone. But beside everything else previous, this social activist performed the duty of our intelligentsia: to act in behalf of the fallen.

Here, that is all I can say about this.” [Arabov was screen writer for the 1988 film adaptation of the Strugatskij story, “Day of Eclipse” (Den’ Zatmeniya) – more about this below].

Boris Strugatskij was born April 15, 1933 in Leningrad. The future writer’s father worked in the Russian State museum. His mother was an instructor teaching Russian literature in school where Boris himself studied. The war years separated the family. During the Great Patriotic War the Strugatskij family found itself in besieged Leningrad. Because Boris was ill in January 1942, Arkadij and Nathan Zalmanovich Strugatskij were sent to the evacuation point by themselves. Only in 1943 did the older brother Arkadij succeed in bringing his mother and brother Boris to the village of Tashel in the Orenburg Region (then the Chkalov Region [so named, presumably for the pioneer Soviet aviator]). They returned to Leningrad in 1945. In 1950 Boris finished school with a silver medal and planned to enter into the physics department of Leningrad State University. However, for a number of reasons he was not accepted. He then offered documents to the mathematical and mechanical physics department where he completed studies in 1955, under the specialty of “stellar astronomer.”

“Boris Strugatskij remained the last of the cohort of the best Soviet artists, writers, cinematographers, in the ranks with [Andrej] Tarkovskij and [singer, actor, composer] Vladimir Vysotskij. He was a living messenger from

that time, one of not so many who in the 1990s did not change himself but remained an establishment figure,” the publicist Dmitrij Bykov [a frequent contributor to the long-lived national weekly magazine *Ogonyok*] wrote in eulogy for the writer. “He was absolutely, an undiluted genius. And who is there to compare him with today? I do not know of anyone. His death is a catastrophe of the scale of [folk singer and song writer] Okudzhava’s passing. With his departure, all has become still darker and more airless,” Bykov said.

Bykov distinctly remembers the time when he was first acquainted with the creativity of the Strugatskij brothers. “It was a collection of 1962 science fiction stories and [I was] in Russia [and] it was 1975. I was sick and 8 years old when I read ‘Attempt at Flight’ [or ‘Escape Attempt’]. It was the first time in my life that I read text that I could not physically pull myself away from. And all night I read, until I had it all. For me every new [piece of] writing from the Strugatskis was such a discovery. From the first page, I fell prisoner to that text.”

The first collaborative production of the Brothers Strugatskij saw light in 1958 – in the magazine *Technology for Young People* (*Tekhnika Molodezhi*) in which was published the story *From Without*, writing of the comings to Earth of visitors from space. In 1960 there came out another novella. And then a year later the Strugatskijs released their first book, *The Land of Purple Clouds*.

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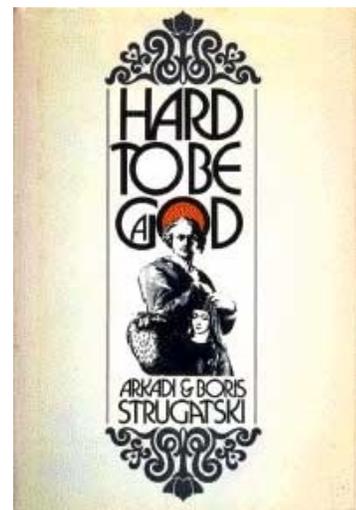
Above: A file photo of the late Boris Strugatskij from the internet or the [Our Texas](#) web site, also found at [Examiner.com](#).



Above: The biweekly [newspaper](#) *Nash Texas* (Russian for *Our Texas*), the primary source for this article, translated by Wes Kelly, Triton Systems LLC.

Newspaper web site:

www.ourtx.com

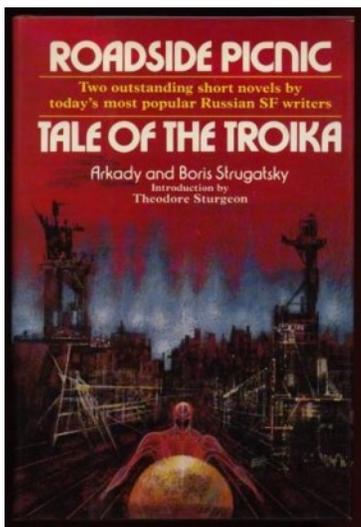
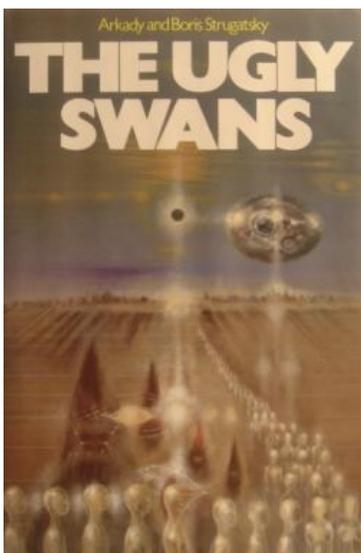


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Current Events



Above: A file photo of the late Arkadij (left) Boris Strugatskij from the internet, also [found](#) at [TV Tropes](#).



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Within less than 10 years they created basic productions of what could be known variously as the *Noon Universe* or *Meridian World* series – a future domain where communist ideals prevailed, where people befriended each other, where humanity met with an alien mind and determined that it was not so alien after all.

In 1965 they wrote *Monday Begins on Saturday*, about the evangelists of the Soviet “ITR” or technical class; the engineers, programmers, designers and other inhabitants of the scientific investigative institutes almost without number.

Monday and several later stories concluded the epoch of Strugatskij optimism. In the extended period of the following 25 years, the authors consequently presented to readers their all the less romantic but nonetheless powerful works.

In the interval of the 60s and 70s the authors wrote their key work, *Doomed City* or simply *Grad* (the novel would be published much later), where the fates of their own and the new generation were sharply reflected in the multi-layered society of the *panopticum*. In *Doomed City* it is not even clear who is feared more, the Nazi Geiger, the Stalinist Voronin or the person who was a representative of the sixties generation and disenchanted with all, Katsman.

The brothers wrote *Ugly Swans*, having held it, like *Grad*, on the table for two decades. The anti-bureaucratic *Trojka Fairy Tale* interrupted the conditional continuation of *Mon-*

day, which is not entirely read from far away with a smile. There also appeared *Roadside Picnic*, a production as provocative as it was full of despair.

“That I came into contact with the text and then tried to transfer it into cinematic medium, it is from one side a wild responsibility and difficult – period,” declares actor and director Fyodor Bondarchuk [Son of Sergei Bondarchuk, film director of the 1960s production of Lev Tolstoj’s “War and Peace”]. “And yet from the other, you remember about this as about the elation experienced when you succeed in coming into contact with great literature and completely magical names. And the creation of ‘Worlds of the Strugatskis,’ and what they left behind them – not only as literati brilliantly using the Russian language and forming the entire caste of the intelligentsia, they also explain what is happening here and now in this country, or what can occur in the world or in society at large, sometimes via [their] funny or even completely fantastic spaces or worlds, this certainly is their main attainment. And that, certainly, is a great, great loss.”

Finally the authors return to the *Meridian World*, already it is far from being as joyous as it was 15-20 years ago. There the end justified the means. Terror forces one to go for murder. And humanity, which earlier did not shy away from influencing other civilizations toward progress, seems not to realize that with them, in the course of 100 years, a new race conducts detailed experiments.

One of the last collaborative productions of Arkadij and

Boris – *Evil Overload*, finally revealed them as writers of social commentary, quite pessimistically looking at the future – beyond dependence on that somewhat bright one they [once] promised to make.

After the death of his brother Arkadij Strugatskij in 1991, Boris, in his words, “continued to guide a thick beam [boat] of literature with a two-hand tiller - but without a partner.” Under the pseudonym S. Vititskij, he published the novels, *A Search of Predestination, or the 27th Theorem of Etiquette* and the *Powerless Worlds*. For the full collection of compositions of the Strugatskis, the writer prepared *A Commentary for Proceeding*.

Though even at that, at times it had been difficult for the public to separate one brother from the other. It is said that Arkadij’s daughter once heard how someone whispered behind her back, “There goes the daughter of the Strugatskij brothers.”

Boris introduced a separate contribution to the development of Soviet science fiction. In 1974 he organized a significant seminar. It was not in the least that thanks to that seminar, readers found out about other Soviet science fiction writers Svyatoslav Loginov, Vyacheclav Rybakov and Aleksandr Tyurin. There they formulated the project *Time of the Scholars*. In that framework, well known science fiction writers developed the *Meridian World* and other domains of the Strugatskijs. But from that moment, their writers’ duet was no more.

In later years Boris related to the science fiction “reality”

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that they constructed skeptically. In one interview in the fall of 2011, he noted that within ten years the Strugatskij books would scarcely survive. And he added that, more than that, the universe was empty and free of intellect.

Both books of Boris Strugatskij, written without Arkadij, are full of disenchantment. The main hero of the first, *In Search of Predesignation*, determines that his fate safeguarded him from death, not his own efforts. The hero of the second, *Free of Supermen*, was powerless and unknowing, and even not wanting to resist surroundings or circumstance. In this story their aging, though almost immortal sensei (“teacher” in Japanese) is unable to teach anyone anything.

Ten years ago, on October 2, 2002, Boris Natanovich put in a place in his last book, “There is absolutely no time,” the sensei said, even with some despair. He slumped into the seat, placed his hands on his knees, but now he bent again, almost having curled in the straps, “Absolutely,” he repeated, “No time.”

Since 1998 on the official Strugatskij Brothers website there is posted an interview with Boris. He answers questions from fans. The last comments of Strugatskij were published on November 4, 2012. “Patience, stability and a bit of divine grace,” so he answered to the question of a reader about how to become a writer.

“I am unable to recover myself. We get poorer and poorer.” Daniel Granin responded to the death of his colleague

in the writing workplace.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitrij Medved called Strugatskij’s death an uncompensated loss for Russian and world literature. “Boris Natanovich Strugatskij passed on from life, a great writer and thinker. A loss for our own and world literature,” he wrote on Twitter.

The creativity of the Strugatskij brothers became the measure of changes in Russia, declared writer and chief editor of “Literaturnaya Gazeta,” Yuriy Polyakov. “Boris survived to see the results of these changes, and in the long run not all of them caused him to rejoice. But fact remains fact. Arkadij and Boris Strugatskij were influences on thought of the 60s, 70s and 80s,” the Literaturnaya Gazeta editor reckons.

Compiled by *Nash Texas* (Russian for *Our Texas*) staff writers from material on the internet.

**Roadside Picnic,
The Stalker,
Inhabited Island;
Film Directors
Tardovskij and Bondarchuk**

One of the most immediately accessible artifacts of the Strugatskijs’ work is the film adaptation of *Roadside Picnic* by director Andrej Tardovskij, the adaptation titled *The Stalker*. In fact, it can be seen in segments on YouTube, the first part a 63-minute segment.

Alexander Tardovskij participated in the adaptation and then went on to a career in part in the west. But the film itself had some interesting elements besides. Beginning with a stark black and white

sequence of initial scenes it introduces characters with handles like *Stalker*, *Writer* and *Professor*. The initial grim, bleak industrial future is much like a Twilight Zone set but in much more detail than what 1960s sound studios provided, adding desolate industrial landscapes to which generic humans cling like post barnacles. An expedition is launched into *The Zone*, where decades before a meteorite or something else fell. *The Zone* is a region where humans have capitulated and no one understands what goes on - unless it is an intuitive *Stalker* guide. It is cordoned off as with the Berlin Wall. Troops have vanished into its confines and never returned.

The expedition commences under conditions of stealth and pursuit and then emerges into a silent realm of forest vegetation and COLOR. This could be the inspiration of imitations such as the television series *Lost*. Who knows? As green as it is though, the landscape could have been a national park set aside for a battle like Kursk or Stalingrad with ruins and rusted military hardware dotting the undergrowth. The explorers head under the *Stalker’s* guidance to a central ruin and a room. Dialogue is terse and generic, but the camera work is “contemplative.” At this writing, I haven’t sorted out how many YouTube installments go into this, but clearly after 60 minutes, the *Stalker* story is hardly done.

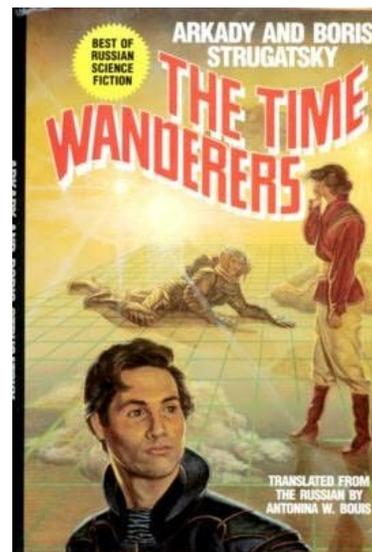
Among Americans who follow science fiction or Russian matters, I have found mixed reviews for this film. One of us on Horizons staff commented that with its director and writer pedigree *The Stalker* often appears on best film

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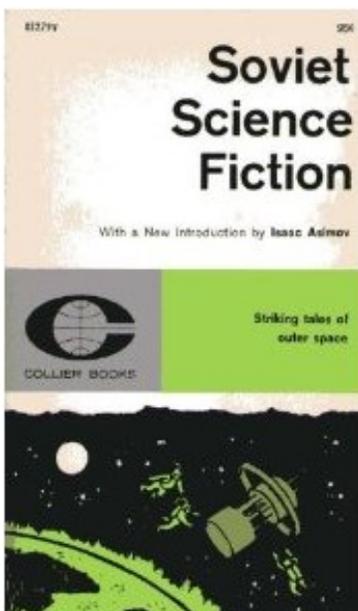


Above: Boris Strugatsky. Image credit: [Wikipedia](#).

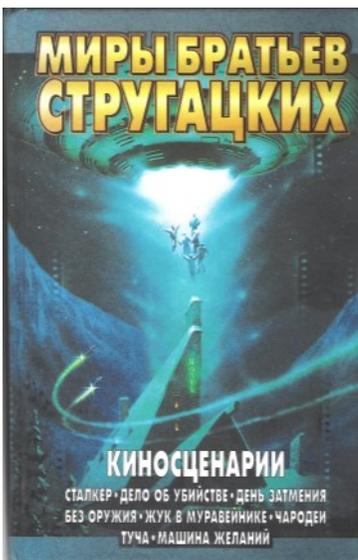


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Above: Book cover image from [Amazon](#).



Above: From the collection of Wes Kelly. *The Worlds of the Brothers Strugatskiy. Film Scenarios. The Stalker, A Case about a Murder (Alternate Title: Hotel of the Fallen Alpinist), Day of Eclipse, Without Armament, Beetle in the Anthill, The Magician, The Cloud, Machine of Desires.*

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lists, yet he wonders whether the Russian science fiction field had been as verdant as others in the 20th century. Another correspondent who shared the same Russian language training this writer received in military service reported that he did not like the film and preferred *Roadside Picnic (Piknik na Obochine)*, the book on which it was based, recommending that in preference – if I liked science fiction.

As it turns out, the only Strugatskiy anthology I have includes their screenplay for the same film, but not the original novel. Or does it? As can be seen from the cover, *The Stalker* is the lead story of a series of screenplays. [Translation: *The Worlds of the Brothers Strugatskiy - Film Scenarios: The Stalker, A Case about a Murder, Day of Eclipse, Without Armament, Beetle in the Anthill, The Magician, The Cloud and Machine of Desires.* An Alternate title for *A Case about a Murder* was *Hotel of the Fallen Alpinist*.] The texts are not all written in conventional screenplay form as dialogs and stage notes as would be a Shakespeare play (for example, *Stalker: Hello. Scholar: Good morning.*), but in the prose form of novellas. And finally, in marginal notes, the Strugatskijs explain how the final story – not *Machine of Desires*, but *The Stalker* was the version that reached the screen.

“Several years ago there befall on us the honor of participating in the creation of the film, *The Stalker*. Director Andrej Arsen’evich Tarkovskij initially took as the basis for his film the fourth chapter of our story, *Roadside Picnic*. However, in the process of

working over nearly three years we arrived at a representation of the story with hardly anything that remained in common with the original other than the terms *Stalker*, *the Zone* and a mystical place where desires are enacted.”

Stalker moves slowly to set the scene, but it does pose some interesting problems about genies in lamps. As the trio approaches the terraced site where things should come to a head I had to wonder if the *Professor* had blown his chance to have his wish fulfilled (a Nobel Prize in Physics as surmised by the *Writer*) by fretting about his lost rucksack full of fresh underwear. Then he carps back at the *Writer*, “And so you want to offer to humanity the treasure of your purchased inspiration?” *The Stalker* guide himself would abjure that, “I am not Fate but the hand of Fate.” He claims that he is leading pilgrims in search of “happiness,” which he hopes will not be bought at cost to others. Since reading the Russian is slow going as a non-native, it leaves time to wonder whether the Strugatskijs have a medieval everyman tale with the monikers. Or is it something else? After all, “academics” and writers were represented by powerful professional organizations in the Soviet Union. Were these viewpoints of Everyman or institutions being examined? Then near the precipice, in the dusty ante room, the *Professor* gets a phone call and a warning from his colleagues that the course he is on will finish him as an academic and destroy the hopes of millions. It turns out that there is more in his knapsack than clean clothes, his answer to the dilemma of allowing indiscriminate wish fulfillments.

Fyodor Bondarchuk, quoted

above, directed a more recent Strugatskiy adaptation to the screen, *Inhabited Island (Obytaemyj Ostrov)*. Based on a *Meridian World* novel titled in English as *Prisoners of Power*, the film scored third biggest at the box office in former Soviet Union lands in 2009, and Bondarchuk received a best acting nomination and a *Golden Eagle* award for his portrayal. Among Strugatskiy stories, *Inhabited Island* has more than the usual summary commentary online. A 22nd century protagonist from a utopian, socialist Earth finds himself marooned on a newly discovered planet with a humanoid society similar to that of his home planet in the mid 20th century, but suffering the effects of a recent nuclear war as well as exhibiting the forces that brought it on.

Forward to the Socialist Future?

“You can have any color as long as it's black.” – Henry Ford, summarizing the Ford Motor Company customer's choices.

“When I was growing up, I read ‘Doomed City’ three times.” – Artem Ponomarev, space scientist and physicist, Universities Space Research Association (USRA), Houston, Texas USA.

Since Andrej Tardovskij also directed the Russian film *Solaris*, we could be lured to think that Stanislav Lem was a Russian science fiction writer as well. He was Polish and was read widely both in the west and Soviet bloc. What about the science fiction environment in Russia? What was the milieu from which the Strugatskiy brothers sprang? We have more questions here than answers.

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While Americans have had their own love affair with science fiction over the decades, there was less trade with Russian ideas in this realm than there has been with the space technology for which science fiction might have provided impetus here and over there. After Sputnik, at which point pulp science fiction magazines had already survived here for decades, Collier and Dell paperbacks published anthologies of Soviet science fiction, one edited by Judith Merrill, a New York science fiction editor and anthologist, others introduced by science fiction writers Isaac Asimov or Theodore Sturgeon. To read these books now in the wake of the Strugatskij brothers' careers would be like opening a time capsule related to them.

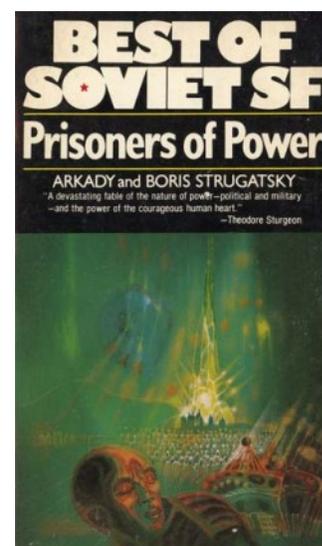
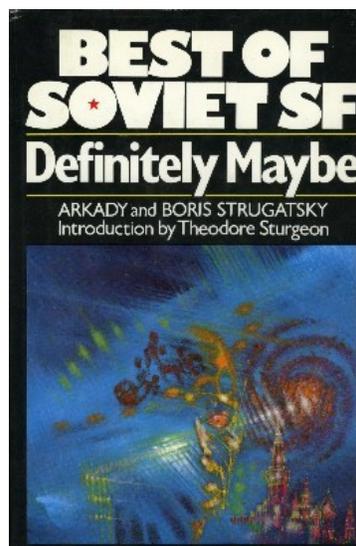
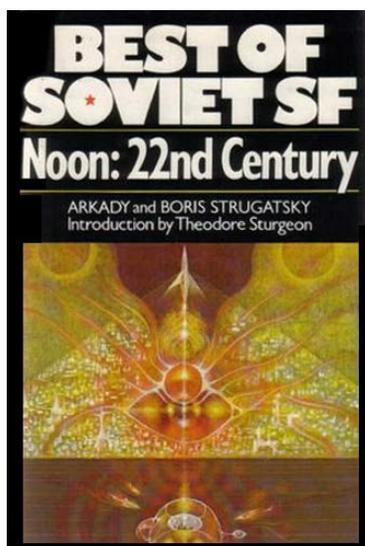
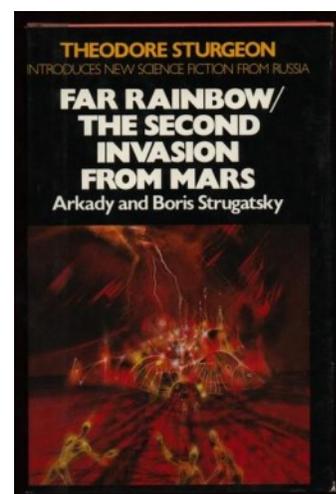
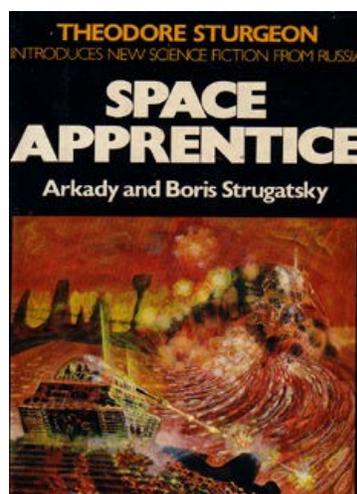
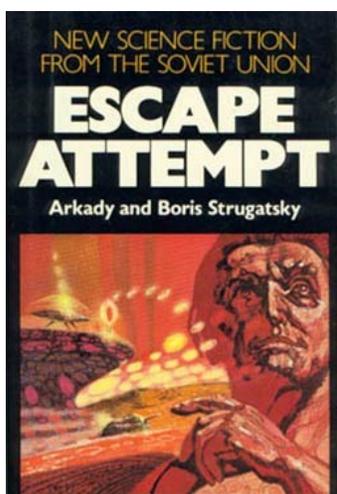
Aside from what might be included in the anthologies, we note that Lev Tolstoj's nephew Aleksandr wrote science fiction in the 1920s. He wrote about socialist Martians (*Aelita*). Rocket pioneer Tsiolkovskij wrote science fiction as well, if only to elaborate on theoretical astronautics. Soviet astronomers used science fiction as concept vehicles much like British author Fred Hoyle, though one suspects without as much thinly veiled invective against the establishment as in the latter's *The Black Cloud*. I submit, however, that traditional Russian or Soviet science fiction mused as much as it liked about products of research institutes or the consequences of launching Sputniks or rockets, but there had to be at least one constraint on their writing – and that was the official view of the future. With the notable exception of Yevgennij Zamyatin's *We*,

written during the avante-garde 1920s period, the Strugatskijs and Count Tolstoy alike were obliged to discover communist utopias right down our temporal corridor within a century or so or when vehicles landed on advanced alien worlds.

That constraint seems gradually to have lifted, or was pried loose by the creativity of Andrej and Boris Strugatskij.

[END]

After reading in the *Stalker* the consequences of a meteor strike - or something else - it is hard not to note the significant Russian impact near Chelyabinsk of a large meteor or small asteroid in mid February 2013. To most it was already observed as coincidental with the passage of a small asteroid DA14 at about the altitude of GPS navigational satellites. Coincidental as that was, another Russian friend (Nikolai Gor'kavyj, co-author of *Physics of Planetary Rings*, 1994 Russian edition) once related to me how he had attended an early [conference](#) on planetary defense against asteroids near his laboratory at "Chelyabinsk - 70." In attendance from America in 1994 was physicist Edward Teller, there to explain how, when it came to asteroid defense, the hydrogen bomb could be the next century's Swiss army knife. Odds makers might reflect less on coincidence and more on whether Chelyabinsk was an intended target. For sure, though, events have become more akin to an Andrej and Boris Strugatskij story. [Wes Kelly]



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