FarRainbows Russian and Soviet Sci Fi on Screen

WADHAM COLLEGE OXFORD

12 April 2013

FAR RAINBOWS: RUSSIAN AND SOVIET SCIENCE FICTION ON SCREEN
A film studies workshop focusing on the legacy of Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii

11-12 APRIL 2013, WADHAM COLLEGE, OXFORD
All workshop events except the film screening and lunch take place in the New Seminar Room, Wadham

PROGRAMME AND ABSTRACTS

PROGRAMME

11 April, 4pm
Screening (in Russian) of *The Dead Mountaineer Hotel* (*Otel "U Pogibshego Al'pinista"*), dir. Grigorii Kromanov, 1979 (Room 3 of the Taylorian Institute, Oxford)

12 April
- 9am: Opening remarks
- 9.15am-10.45am   **SOVIET ALTERITIES: RUSSIAN AND NON-RUSSIAN SCI-FI FILM (CHAIR: ANDREI ROGATCHEVSKI)**
  - ➤ Lars Kristensen (Skövde, Sweden), Russians in Space: Ideological Problems for Red Sci-fi Cinema
  - ➤ Tom Rowley (Cambridge), Adapting Oles' Berdnyk: Cold War Analogy in the Early 1960s
  - ➤ Maria Engström (Dalarna, Sweden), Запах бывшей жизни: Чешская экранизация повести А. и Б. Стругацких «Малыш»
- 10.45am: Coffee
- 11.15am-12.45pm   **NOT ONLY "STALKER": Adaptations of Other Strugatskiis' Novels (CHAIR: YVONNE HOWELL)**
  - ➤ Sofya Khagi (Michigan), Genre Film, Spectacle, and the Strugatskii Brothers in Fyodor Bondarchuk's *Inhabited Island*
  - ➤ Matthias Schwartz (Freie Universität Berlin), Visualising the Imperial Gaze: On Peter Fleischmann's *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein*
  - ➤ Andrei Rogatchevski (Glasgow), Obscuring the Message: *A Billion Years before the End of the World* vs *Days of Eclipse*

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- 1pm: Lunch in the Trapp Room, Wadham
- 2pm-3.30pm: **STUDYING "THE DEAD MOUNTAINEER HOTEL": APPROACHES TO SCI-FI NARRATIVE (CHAIR AND DISCUSSANT: MUIREANN MAGUIRE)**
  - ➤ Henriette Cederlöf (Södertörn, Sweden): Soviet Noir: Kromanov's *Dead Mountaineer Hotel*)
  - ➤ Eva Näripea (Estonian Academy of Arts) : Queering Gender in *Dead Mountaineer Hotel*: Intertextual Considerations of the Novel and the Film)
- 3.30pm: Coffee
- 4pm: **KEYNOTE SPEECH BY PROFESSOR YVONNE HOWELL (RICHMOND)**
  - ➤ What Are We Stalking? A Cognitive Approach to Tarkovskii's Film Adaptation of the Strugatskiis' *Roadside Picnic*
- 5pm: General discussion and concluding remarks
- 6pm: Dinner at a city centre restaurant (tbc)

The workshop organisers are Muireann Maguire and Andrei Rogatchevski. Please contact them with any queries at farrainbows@gmail.com

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ABSTRACTS

1. **«Запах бывшей жизни: экранизация повести А. и Б. Стругацких «Малыш»**

   Maria Engström, Uppsala University/Dalarna University, Sweden

   Повесть Аркадия и Бориса Стругацких «Малыш» (1970 г.) нередко рассматривается исследователями как образец поворота этих авторов от научной к социальной фантастике, с ее интересом к вопросам личной и социальной этики, проблематике дегуманизации, колонизации и «приручения», к понятию «настоящий человек». На материале фильма «Неназначенные встречи» (Чехия, 1994 г.) - экранизации повести «Малыш» - в докладе будет рассмотрены стратегии репрезентации дистопии трансгуманизма как победы технологической рациональности. Особое внимание будет уделено сравнению повести и фильма по следующим аспектам: визуализация планеты Архе как места «бывшей жизни», дихотомия дикарь/постчеловек в образе Малыша, плавающая идентичность и «шизоидность» главных героев как необходимые предпосылки установления контакта.

2. **Keynote: "What Are We Stalking? A Cognitive Approach to Tarkovskii's Film Adaptation of the Strugatskiis' *Roadside Picnic*"**

   Yvonne Howell, Professor of Russian and International Studies, University of Richmond, VA

   Andrei Tarkovskii's film *Stalker* (1980) is famously based on the Strugatskiis' 1972 novel *Piknik na obochine* (Roadside Picnic), and just as famously constructed as a radical distillation of the novel's central enigma. Tarkovskii's film dispenses with almost every aspect of the Strugatskiis' original characters, plot, and setting, in order to deliver an extended meditation on the nature of hope, aspiration, and desire. Is this film "synonymous with both cinema's claim to high art and a test of the viewer's ability to appreciate as such" (Dyer, 2009), and if so, what is at stake in the adaptation from accessible science fiction tale to cinematic artwork? My consideration of this question will invoke not only film adaptation theory, but also cognitive psychology's "existential theory of mind." I will argue that the latter paradigm provides a framework for bringing our experience of the novel and the film closer together again, as both works trigger our urge to read meaning and intentionality into the impersonal gestures of the universe, even as they ask us to reflect upon the implications of this very human urge.

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3. **"Genre Film, Spectacle, and the Strugatskii Brothers in Fyodor Bondarchuk's** *Inhabited Island***"**

Sofya Khagi, University of Michigan

As is well attested in recent movie treatments of their oeuvre, the classics of Soviet science fiction, the Strugatskii brothers, represent one branch of the *Kulturgut* that is being actively recycled and transformed in the post-Soviet context. This talk focuses on Fyodor Bondarchuk's *The Inhabited Island*, parts I-II (*Obitaemyi ostrov,* 2008-09), based on the Strugatskiis' 1969 novel of the same name. I consider the film as the Strugatskiis' shift into contemporary popular or mass culture—a task both obvious and challenging with these practitioners of a "lowbrow" genre writing for and read by the intelligentsia, and grounding their oeuvre in the realm of serious art. The film raises today's burning problems such as technological manipulations with mass consciousness, and has been marketed as testimony to the Strugatskiis' social prescience as well as a more radical present-day corrective to their visions. Yet whereas the Strugatskii brothers made their mark by transforming the conventions of genre literature into the mythologemes of late-Soviet intelligentsia, the movie version of *The Inhabited Island* adapts the novel to the dominant stereotypes and promptings of mass culture—in effect, reversing the Strugatskiis' own teleology. It approaches the novel from within the trappings of a global sci-fi blockbuster— glamourizing technology, overindulging in generic pastiche, suppressing psychological ambiguities, and reprocessing narrative into spectacle. Not only does the power of spectacle threaten to evacuate the Suvinian effect of cognitive estrangement in general, but special effects and generic conventions undermine specific points made by the narrative. As such, the film might be seen as remaining in the trajectory of entropy both diegetically and extra-diegetically.

4. **Russians in space: Ideological problems for red sci-fi cinema**

Lars Kristensen, Högskolan i Skövde, Sweden

The imagined worlds of sci-fi films have to be projected as being founded on 'rational scientific' reasoning (Lopez, 1993) and at the same time having 'no normative ground' (Sobchack 1996). This gives the genre a precarious relationship not only with past and present, but also with reality. This could equally be said about socialist realism, which frequently featured films with no normative ground in reality, while sporting a logical rationality of what the future would be like. Although communist science fiction is

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intrinsically transnational and prone to cross-socialist exchange due to its aim to project a socialist and thereby a post-national future, the link to socialist realism was always a troublesome one. The depiction of the distant future of an ideal communist society had the potential of being critical of the present, not so bright, reality. Hence, due to its severed relationship with reality, the genre was viewed as potentially subversive in the eyes of the censors. This paper will look at the representations of Russians in communist Eastern European sci-fi films, such as *Silent Star* (1960), *Signal* (1970) and *Pilot Pirx's Inquest* (1979), films which have Russian characters as professors, scientists, captains of spacecrafts or more ordinary members of space crews. These Russian characters are adhering to the projection of socialist realism, where harmony and international friendship were the backbone of a fully-fledged communist future. But even if the red sci-fi film projects the 'politics of international friendship' and narrates the Eastern Europe as 'one bloc', it also enables us to detect uneven hierarchies within the socialist society.

Representations of Russians in space for discussion include:

- *Silent Star* (1960) – Prof. Arsenov/Mikhail N. Postnikov (German/Polish) Stanislaw Lem

- *Icarus XB 1* (1963) – Vladimir Abajev/Zdenek Stepánek (Czechoslovakia) Stanislaw Lem

- *Signal* (1970) – Pavel (Evgenie Zharikov) (German/Polish) Calos Raush

- *Pilot Pirx's Inquest* (1979) – Commander Pirx (Sergei Desnitsky) (Polish/Soviet) Stanislaw Lem

5. **Queering Gender in Dead Mountaineer Hotel: Intertextual Considerations of the Novel and the Film**

Eva Näripea, Estonian Academy of Arts / Estonian Literary Museum, Tallinn, Estonia

This paper looks at ambiguous gender identities in Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii's 1969 novel Dead Mountaineer's Hotel (Otel "U Pogibshego Al'pinista") and its screen adaptation by Soviet Estonian director Grigori Kromanov (Tallinnfilm, 1979). While homosexuality was criminalized in Soviet Union, these texts approach the sensitive subject of ambivalent sexual and gender identities under the guise of a genre that is by definition 'unrealistic' and thus provides an effective platform for presenting stances that undermine the heteronormative

discourse of the dominant ideology. My readings are informed by queer theory, especially by Judith Butler's groundbreaking work (e.g. Butler 2007 [1990]; Butler 2004), in terms of considering these representations in juxtaposition with the dominant discourse of heteropatriarchy, understood as 'an overarching system of male dominance through the institution of compulsory heterosexuality' (Yep 2003: 31) that 'ensues male right of access to women [and] ... includes the invisibility of lesbians'; it is 'men dominating and de-skilling women in any of a number of forms, and women devaluing (of necessity) female bonding' (Code 2000: 245). Especially the film's denial of heteronormativity as the sole accepted mode of sexual identity parallels with its obvious denunciation of oppressive power relations and the attempts by Soviet authorities to combat all kinds of otherness, including of ideological and ethnic origin.

6. **Obscuring the Message:** *A Billion Years before the End of the World* **vs** *Days of Eclipse*

Andrei Rogatchevski, University of Glasgow

Anyone who has read the Strugatskiis' *A Billion Years before the End of the World* (1977) and watched Aleksandr Sokurov's film version of it, *Days of Eclipse* (1988), would agree that prior knowledge of the novel is essential to the understanding of the events depicted in *Days of Eclipse*, as the film does not explain them properly. Why does Sokurov seem to deliberately obscure the film's message? The book, the Strugatskiis' own film script version of it and the film itself are analysed in search of an answer that may or may not shed light on Sokurov's creative practices and/or the film adaptation theory.

7. **Adapting Oles' Berdnyk: Cold war analogy in the early 1960s**

Tom Rowley, University of Cambridge

Distant signals, lost operatives and dangerous travels to other planets are the building blocks of post-war science fiction. The connections between plot device and cold war reality appear solid in the American film tradition, but what of Soviet science fiction? This paper will examine the adaptation of the novella *Sertse vsesvitu* (1962) by Oles' Berdnyk (1927-2003) into the film *Mechte navstrechu* (1963). Berdnyk's own biography suggests the possibility of an allegorical reading in its own right. A former camp survivor who made a living by writing science fiction in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Berdnyk eventually became a member of the

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Writers' Union of Ukraine and was close to the 'nationalist' wing of Soviet Ukrainian writers. Eventually imprisoned as part of the 1972 crackdown on dissident activity in Ukraine, Berdnyk later became one of the founding members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group. As if testament to the complicated trajectories of the Soviet intelligentsia, he would later make a public confession on television denouncing his anti-Soviet activity in the 1980s and run for President of Ukraine in 1991. Despite his popularity in the early 1960s, *Mechte navstrechu* would remain the sole adaptation of Berdnyk's work into film. It outlines the ill-fated response of an alien civilisation to future Soviet radio forays into outer space, which ends in a tragic human-alien encounter on a Mars moon. As I will show, the film employs a series of characters, scenes, and themes which are all strongly reminiscent of rhetoric concerning displaced persons, foreign radio broadcasts, and early cold war defection. Thus I will trace a series of potential allusions to more immediate tragic histories and Soviet propaganda in an attempt to reveal cold war tensions alongside the intricacies of adaptation.

8. Visualizing the imperial gaze: On Peter Fleischmann's "Hard to be a God"

Matthias Schwartz, Institute for East-European Studies/Peter Szondi-Institute, Freie Universität Berlin

When Peter Fleischmann's movie adaptation of Arkady and Boris Strugatskii's novel *Hard to be a God* came out in 1990, German critics labeled it as one of the worst science fiction films ever made, regarding it as yet more proof that European filmmakers are unable to produce Hollywood-style blockbusters. After twenty years, that total failure to transform the Strugatskiis' 1964 bestseller into a good movie can be read as symptomatic for the *perestroika* period and the end of the Cold War. After the traumatic experiences of the American intervention in Vietnam (1965-1973) and the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan (1979-1989), the central conflict of the film, of an ostensibly high-developed civilization getting into contact with an allegedly primitive, backward world, gained a much more ambiguous, politicized meaning. Even more so because Hollywood offered extremely popular interpretations of these events in the same time period, beginning with *Apocalypse Now* (1979), followed by *Rambo II* (1985) and *Rambo III* (1988). Drawing on a post-colonial and intertextual perspective, I will analyze Fleischmann's movie as an attempt to question the dominant Hollywood pictures and narratives with the help of cinematic devices. Similar to Niklas Luhmann's second-order observer, *Hard to be a God* reflects on the popular pictures of humanitarian interventions and individual heroism as a product of a "pathological" desire, dysfunctional communications and an omnipresent imperial gaze.

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9. **Soviet Noir: Kromanov's Dead Mountaineer Hotel**

Henriette Cederlöf, Södertörn University, Sweden

In 1969 the Strugatskii brothers embarked on a literary experiment that resulted in a genre hybrid between the detective story and science fiction titled *Otel U pogibshego al'pinista*. Ten years later the novel became the first of their works to be adapted for the screen. The film, *Hukkunud alpinisti hotel*, was made in Soviet Estonia by the Russian-Estonian director Grigori Kromanov.

While the Strugatskiis' novel apparently strives towards the classical Agatha Christie type of murder mystery, the film takes off in another direction: towards the film noir. This is evident in the general visual aesthetics of the film: in the employment of space, the low-key lightning scheme, the camerawork, as well as in the employment of voiceover and the film's general theme of a lone protagonist facing a largely incomprehensible environment. Film noir has often been interpreted as giving expression to various forms of anxiety, whether of modernity in general or the more specific wartime anxieties of the 1940s when the genre first emerged. While often associated with a specific type of Hollywood films made during a specific period in time, studies of it has proved it to be a considerably broader phenomenon, when it comes to both time and space. Internationalism and globalism can in fact be said to be major concerns of film noir. This is another feature of the genre that is evident in Kromanov's film. My paper will examine this shift in the genre and how it has affected the narrative.