

Representation of History in the Brothers Strugatsky's Novel *Hard to Be a God*

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Abstract: The brothers Strugatsky's popular science fiction novel *Hard to be a God*, which depicts the appalling consequences resulting from the interference of a group of historians from Earth who arrive on a distant planet Arkanar in order to speed up its course of history and help to establish communism, not only critiques the Stalinist repressions of the Soviet intelligentsia of the 1930s, but also provides an interesting socio-political commentary on the life and role of the intelligentsia during the 1960s. Persecuted for their art, like the Soviet intelligentsia in the 1930s, the citizens of Arkanar face repressions: citizens who display literacy or artistic talent are exterminated on a mass scale. In addition, the Strugatskys seek to disprove the dominant in the Soviet Union Marxist theory of history and propose that—contrary to a Marxist perception of history as a sequential chain of events that will undoubtedly lead to communism—history is cyclical and in fact tends to repeat itself. A telling example of their view on history is their depiction of a Fascist coup that anachronistically occurs in medieval Arkanar, suggesting that Fascism is not merely a phenomenon of modernity and, in fact, can reappear at any time. For the Strugatskys, Fascism acquires a broader meaning: it is any totalitarian regime that oppresses the masses, annihilates culture, and controls intellectual thought. Ultimately, the Strugatskys propose that the intelligentsia is the main source of resistance to a Fascist regime. Only the intellectuals, who still haven't lost their critical thinking capacity and are not afraid to question the status quo, have the potential and power to fight back against oppression.

Keywords: Arkady Strugatsky; Boris Strugatsky; Strugatsky brothers; Soviet sci-fi

The science fiction of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky gained immense popularity among Soviet readers in the 1960-1980s and had a substantial impact on the Soviet intelligentsia and their ideological outlook. Such popularity can be attributed to the fact that unlike Western SF—which provides an alternative, speculative perception of reality with the chief focus on socio-political commentary as well as technological progress—most of Soviet SF, though

still incorporating socio-political critique, mainly centers around ideological, philosophical, and ethical problems. The Strugatskys' novels are a telling example of this, as they are particularly well known for incorporating and reflecting on contemporary philosophical and moral issues. Moreover, their novels also provide an interesting insight into the concept of history and progress, as well as function as a social blueprint or an ideological model for the

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communist future. One of the most popular novels of the Strugatsky brothers' oeuvre, *Hard to be a God* (1964/2014), addresses some of the moral dilemmas facing Soviet intelligentsia during the 1960-1980s.

This novel attracted a lot of critical attention due to its rich thematic content. While some Strugatsky scholars (Il'ia Kukul'in, Dmitriy Volodihin and Gennadiy Prashkevich) analyze the theme of "progressorstvo," the figure of the Progressor—what it symbolizes and entails—others (Elana Gomel, Irina Kaspe) focus on the use of the Aesopian language and allegorical devices targeted especially toward the Soviet intellectuals of that time. Another group of literary critics explores the notion of history and historical progress in this text. Specifically, Simonetta Salvestroni and Elana Gomel discuss the Strugatskys' treatment of history, which seems to contradict the Marxist theory of historical materialism and implies that history in fact does not follow a number of "social" stages of historical development or modes of production that inevitably result in the establishment of communism.

I agree with Salvestroni and Gomel's arguments and propose that what Strugatskys' *Hard to be a God* presents is a multi-layered commentary on history. On the one hand, the novel contains numerous allusions to the "real" history, specifically to the Soviet past, reminiscent of Stalinist repressions, and the present history under Krushchev, whose unpredictable treatment of the artists precipitated the fear that the oppression of intelligentsia, similar to

conditions under Stalin's regime, was reemerging. At the same time, the Strugatskys undermine the Marxist theory of history (historical materialism), widely popular at that time, thereby suggesting that perhaps the concept of history and social relations in the traditional Marxist sense have to be reevaluated in order for us to ever attain or step foot in the "realized" communist utopia. Ultimately, I argue that history in this novel not only deviates from its prearranged course, but in fact repeats itself—thereby depicting time as cyclical (chaotic), rather than sequential.

Soviet Science Fiction

One of the important goals of science fiction, as many scholars contend (Levitas, Goodwin, Plattell, Sargent, Jameson), is to provide a social and political commentary/criticism of the existing conditions via the creation of a science-fictional novum and the rhetoric of "estrangement." While both Western and Soviet science fiction raise important ideological and political questions and offer a variety of speculations about the future, Soviet science fiction has been particularly preoccupied and actively engaged with pondering the destiny of its country. Indeed, beginning with the October Revolution of 1917 through the 1930s, and later through the Thaw period, the Soviet intelligentsia has been enthusiastically involved in the discussion of the possible blueprints for the country's future. As suggested by Rafail Nudelman in his work "Soviet Science Fiction and the Ideology of Soviet Society" (1989), "in contrast to Western models,

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Russian social thought and, accordingly, Russian literature have always displayed a heightened sense of their ideological potentiality" (p. 38). Specifically, historical events of the twentieth century afforded ideal conditions for that creative ideological modeling: "Russian SF . . . was viewed as a convenient means of fictionalizing certain statements about the future rather than as a new artistic method of reflection and cognition" (p. 38-39). During the Thaw, the Soviet intellectuals fervently speculated about the future of the USSR: with the death of Stalin, a massive destalinization project was initiated, which also required the revisiting of communist principles. Soviet people felt that they were given another chance to restore the true essence of communism. Utopian dreaming was reawakened: hopes for the bright communist utopian future resumed and resurfaced.

Since literature and art played an essential role in reifying the utopian imagination, science fiction was expected to supply readers with possible social blueprints to satisfy that imagination. As Il'ia Kukulin explains in his article "Alternative Social Blueprinting in Soviet Society of the 1960s and the 1970s, or Why Left-Wing Political Practices Have Not Caught on in Contemporary Russia" (2011), during the Thaw years in the Soviet Union, "a particular form of activity" was born called "alternative social blueprinting," which mainly flourished in art and literature (p. 53). Consequently, Soviet science fiction narratives seldom featured groundbreaking technological innovations and explorations of exotic worlds—as the majority of Western science fiction did—but were mainly

situated within somewhat "real political and social space contemporaneity" (Nudelman, 1989, p. 40). Ultimately, Soviet science fiction excelled in participating in what Frederic Jameson (1988) refers to as "cognitive mapping," i.e., producing, via imaginative processes, "a vision of the future that grips the masses," and thereby offering necessary rhetorical tools to understand and find our place in history, enabling us to reclaim the past, dream about the future, and do something about the present (p. 355).

The Strugatsky Brothers

The renowned brothers Strugatsky were among those Soviet science fiction writers who vigorously partook in providing the long-awaited social blueprints for the communist future. Their famous novel *Hard to be a God* is a vivid exemplar of that.

First, let us briefly examine how Strugatskys managed to comment on the contemporary socio-political historical situation in the Soviet Union (and somehow avoid censorship) and explore how the conventions of science fiction as a literary genre enabled them to do so. It has to be noted that the novel was originally conceived, as Kukulin (2011) affirms, "as an optimistic adventure story," but the plans changed when, in 1962, Khrushchev "caused a public commotion at an art exhibition at the Manezh and presented artistic celebrities with some harsh ideological ultimatums" (p. 59). The Strugatskys began to worry that the oppression of intelligentsia, similar to the one

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under Stalin's regime, was coming back, shattering once again their hopes for the utopian communist future. As the Strugatskys themselves articulate:

One thing became, as the saying goes, painfully clear to us. Illusions are out. Hopes for a bright future are out. We are being managed by niggards and enemies of culture. They will never be on our side. They will always be against us. They will never allow us to say what we hold to be right because what they hold to be right is something altogether different. And while for us communism is a world of freedom and creativity, for them communism is a society in which the people at large carry out, swiftly and with pleasure, all the instructions of the Party and the government. (as cited in Kukulin, 2011, p. 59)

Thus, a positive adventure story, originally conceived as a utopia, turned into a daring (though not open) condemnation of the Soviet regime.

Like many other authors at that time, the Strugatskys could not openly criticize the Soviet state and hence, to escape from the watchful eye of censors, had to use literary devices that allowed them to mask some of the more obvious allusions and comparisons with contemporary Soviet life. At the first glance, however, it appears that the Strugatskys follow the guidelines of the socialist realist aesthetic doctrine, established in the 1930s, which, as sug-

gested by Patrick McGuire in his work *Red Stars: Political Aspects of Soviet Science Fiction* (1985), prompted the authors to propagate communist ideals and "encourage the Soviet population by painting a vivid picture of the happy era of full communism" (p. 25). As I explore in more detail in my dissertation titled "Post-Utopian Science Fiction in Postmodern American and Russian Literatures" (2018), science fiction authors were to depict their futuristic Soviet societies as having already attained or striving to attain communism (the portrayal of which must, of course, be positive), which was typically contrasted with the "negative" depiction of the Soviet state's enemies—usually represented by foreign planets stuck in the earlier stages of historical development (under capitalism or feudalism), which are in desperate need of help. Through the obvious juxtaposition between the "perfect" utopian Soviet state and "barbaric" alien planets, Soviet SF authors, including the brothers Strugatsky, were able to employ the conventions of the SF genre to insert hidden allusions to communism and Soviet social norms—so subtle that they managed to pass through censorship—in their depictions of alien planets, with their evil oppressive regimes and inferior socio-political structure (p. 233).

In *Hard to be a God*, the aforementioned dichotomy between the two planets—in this case, between the medieval Arkanar and progressive Soviet Earth—is not only presented and clearly outlined, but is also markedly emphasized through the mission that the protagonist and his crew are assigned to carry out.

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The story unfolds on a distant planet in a kingdom of Arkanar, to which the main character Anton and other Earthlings are sent. Earth apparently has already reached the perfect state of communism; the Earth people are sent to help the local society to “uplift” their civilization and bring it closer to communism (Gomel, 2004, p. 92). Anton and the other Earthlings are young historian-scientists, supporters of Marxist ideals and the theory of inevitable progress, who attempt to prove and materialize their theories in real life on Arkanar. They are what Strugatskys call “progressors”—outsiders who come from a society with a superior socio-political structure, transplanted into less developed or “backward” societies to speed up the historical progress and bring them closer to the establishment of communism, the final stage of historical development. Progressors are not supposed to interfere with the flow of events. They are to simply observe and slowly, using no force or violence, to initiate the process of moving toward the formation of communism. As Kukulín (2011) asserts: “A Progressor is someone sent by a more highly developed civilization to one that is less developed, with the aim of acting secretly, through political agreements and other covert actions, to start social process there moving ‘in the right direction’ (toward communism, that is) and to rescue intellectuals and the ordinary men from their dire straits” (p. 58). The seemingly exemplary SF novum created in this novel, which sets up the anticipated “us-vs.-them” scenario, in which the medieval Arkanar and its residents are going to be reeducated and saved by the Earthlings from what appears to

be a fascist coup, is brilliantly used to critique the very regime it was supposed to extol.

The most powerful allusion to the contemporary Soviet society in this text is the persecution of the local intelligentsia—or, indeed, anybody who can read or write—in Arkanar. The sudden and abrupt domination of the army of Grays, who, first and foremost, decides to exterminate any remnant of intellectual thought to pave the way for the establishment of the supreme fascist rule of the Black Holy Order, painfully resembles the political situation of the Soviet Union under both the Stalin and Khrushchev regimes. As expressed by one of the Grays:

Literacy, literacy is the source of it all, my brothers! First they tell us money can't buy happiness, then they say peasants are people, too, and it only gets worse—offensive verses, then rioting. Hang them all, my brothers! You know what I'd do? I'd ask them straight out: Can you read? Off to the gallows! Write verses? Off to the gallows! Know your multiplication tables? Off to the gallows, you know too much! (p.26)

The main Earthling character, Anton, or Don Rumata as he is best known among the locals, works undercover and attempts to save the Arkanarian intelligentsia from the total and unjust extermination by the Grays: he hides and helps to transport doctors, teachers, poets, etc., to the neighboring kingdoms. The oppressed existence of the intellectuals of

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Arkanar, who have become alienated in their own country, symbolizes the life of the Soviet intelligentsia under Stalin and Khrushchev. As Mark Lipovetsky argues in his article "Eshche Raz o Komplekse Progressora" (2015) («One More Time about the Concept of Progressor»), the figure of the progressor, a symbol for the contemporary Soviet intellectual, is surrounded by the culturally and intellectually empty society, which he tries to modernize (p. 6). Indeed, in the medieval-turned-fascist setting of Arkanar, "Soviet intellectuals of the 60s recognized in the Strugatskys' progressors charming metaphors of their own socio-cultural situation" ("Советские интеллектуалы-шестидесятники опознали в прогрессорах Стругацких обаятельные метафоры своей собственной социокультурной ситуации") (p. 6). Other hidden allegories and allusions in this fictitious society to the actual "historical" reality of Soviet life at that time include the figure of Don Reba, the leader of the Grays and Prime Minister of Arkanar, who originally was named Don Rebiia—a blatant satire on the historical figure of ruthless Lavrentii Beria, the chief of the Soviet secret police during 1940s-50s, who supervised the Gulag labor camp system and managed "sharashkas," the secret research laboratories in labor camps where many distinguished Soviet scientists labored for free. In addition, the merciless extermination of doctors whom Don Reba blamed for trying to poison the King of Arkanar undoubtedly brings to mind the infamous "Doctor's Plot" (1953), in which prominent Jewish doctors, accused of plotting to assassinate Stalin, were arrested and tortured. The omnipresent

state propaganda of the Stalinist era can be easily identified and detected in the novel's depiction of the Arkanarian court, which, under Don Reba's supervision, is now prohibited to perform any subversive ballads or poems and quickly turns into a propagandistic machine, glorifying the King and justifying the actions of the Gray army with plays like "The Fall of the Barbarians, or Marshal Totz, King Pitz the First of Arkanar." And of course, multiple references to the long bureaucratic processes and paper work, such as the scene where Don Rumata goes to the Merry Tower to ask for the release of Doctor Budach, reveal the familiar details of the everyday existence ("byt") of the Soviet life.

All these allusions to the Stalinist totalitarian regime are delicately situated within the not-so-subtle context of the burgeoning Fascism in Arkanar, making the two regimes virtually identical. As pointed out by Gomel in her article "The Poetics of Censorship" (1995), the spreading Fascism in Arkanar can be read as a nod toward Nazism—the gray army in the novel is perceptibly compared to the "storm-troopers," the "black 'Order' which supplants them after a violent purge recalls the SS," while Don Reba brings to mind the dark figure of Hitler himself (p. 93). Thus, the unsettling parallelism between Fascism/Nazism and Stalinism reveals Strugatskys' acknowledgement and critique of the atrocities committed during Stalinist times and, simultaneously, warns us that the contemporary society under Khrushchev might see the recurrence of that brutal history.

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These skillfully crafted veiled allusions had appeared before in the Strugatskys' earlier novels, and the Soviet readers were already trained to look for them. As suggested by Irina Kaspe and Yvonne Howell, the Strugatskys were known for their employment of Aesopian language to express their political ideas. Kaspe, in her article "The Meaning of (Private) Life, or Why Do We Read the Strugatskys?" (2011), maintains that Soviet readers were aware of the Strugatskys' affinity for veiled allegories and read their works attentively, searching for hidden messages and allusions. Kaspe notes: "More often than not, the Strugatskys' interpreters seek to 'decipher' or 'decode' the text, to explain what is 'signified' or 'symbolized' by 'strange' or 'fantastic' elements of the narrative. An encrypted message is, of course, primarily treated as a fully realized ideological statement and even as a political manifesto" (p. 32). Howell (1994) also comments on the Strugatskys' masterful ability to convey their message without being caught by the censors. She argues that Strugatskys employed a literary device of what she calls "plot prefiguration" which involves the incorporation of "a well-known motif" or a familiar allusion in the text presented under the guise of an entertaining extra-terrestrial narrative (p. 21). The prefigurative motif then serves as means of "providing a symbolic commentary on certain events and characters" as "it offers a familiar analogy to help the reader understand the modern situation described in the novel" even if the action takes place on a distant planet inhabited by the aliens (p. 21). Readers then can look for "recognizable patterns of al-

lusions" in order to decipher the allegorical layer of the plot (p. 21).

The Interpretation of History and Historical Progress

In addition to their commentary on the current "history" and socio-political situation in the country, the Strugatskys also offer their insight and reflection on the concept of history in a broader sense. For the purpose of this article, I want to specifically focus on the Strugatskys' interpretation of history and historical progress in this novel, which seems to challenge the traditional Marxist view on the concept of history (historical materialism). To begin with, it should be noted that Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* explain their belief in a sequential model of history and historical progress. They believe that the development of civilization is grounded in material forces and thus, societies are organized according to the arrangement of material forces and production. Their understanding of history presupposes a somewhat "linear" trajectory with certain stages of development wherein an evident transformation from the primitive classless society, to slavery, feudalism, then capitalism and finally socialism takes place. The stages are successive: in every stage of historical development, there emerges a new class, precipitating an inevitable class struggle, and ultimately leading to the evolution of a new historical stage. At every stage of historical development, something is lost, and yet something is gained, as the society will continue to progress, while the oppressed masses

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will slowly begin to notice their oppressed status and will gradually form a new class—the proletariat—which will revolt against its oppressor (the bourgeoisie) and put a stop to the perpetual class struggle:

Altogether collisions between the classes of the old society further, in many ways, the course of development of the proletariat. The bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle. At first with the aristocracy; later on, with those portions of the bourgeoisie itself, whose interests have become antagonistic to the progress of industry; at all time with the bourgeoisie of foreign countries. In all these battles, it sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for help, and thus, to drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie. (p. 19)

Thus, every stage in history, with its ebbs and flows, arranges the suitable conditions for the proletariat to finally become enlightened and start a revolution against the ruling class. As Marx and Engels maintain, during the capitalist stage it will become apparent that “the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law . . . Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society” (p. 20-21). Hence, at the capitalist stage, the proletariat

attains class consciousness and a possibility of the revolution emerges, as a result of which socialism can be established. If that does occur, at the later phase of socialism, stateless communism with a classless and propertyless society emerges as the last stage of history with which history ends: since there will be no more class warfare, means will be distributed evenly, and class oppression will cease to exist.

Marx’s historical theory, therefore, implies a certain predetermined progressive nature of history, which grants his historical materialism its defining character. This understanding of history inspires the progressors’ expedition to Arkanar in *Hard to be a God*. Their goal is “to guide the feudal society of the planet Arkanar along the path of historical progress,” thereby ensuring their smooth transition and eventual formation of communism (Howell, 1994, p. 8). However, the events occurring in Arkanar do not seem to fit in the Marxist theory. At the very beginning of the novel, Anton acknowledges this discrepancy during his meeting with Don Kondor:

I want to once again draw your attention to the fact that the situation in Arkanar is not within the scope of basis theory . . . Everything in Arkanar has changed! Some new, systematic factor has appeared. And it looks like Don Reba is intentionally inciting all the grayness in the kingdom against learned people . . . And I’m aware of the theory. But here there are no theories, here there are typical fascist practices, here animals are

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murdering humans every minute! (p. 36-37)

Thus, their main weapon, as Anton refers to their carefully developed theory of Marxism, does not appear to be successfully working in practice (p. 281). Hence, the fascist putsch, a phenomenon typically associated with the age of modernity, anachronistically occurs during the Middle Ages in Arkanar. This illustrates that perhaps historical development is much more complex in nature and doesn't necessarily reflect the Marxist model. The Earthlings, who were convinced that they were well-equipped to control the situation in Arkanar, quickly lose control. As Gomel points out in her article "Gods like Men: Soviet Science Fiction and the Utopian Self" (2004), Anton gradually becomes disenchanted with Marxist theory, since it is obvious that the events in Arkanar do not abide by it: "...history itself suddenly deviates from its utopian route and loops around in strange and painful convolutions" (p. 362). Simonetta Salvestroni also refers to the depiction of the concept of history in this novel in her work "The Ambiguous Miracle in Three Novels by the Strugatsky Brothers" (1984), in which she mentions that Earthlings' attempt to "give rational explanation for everything" and "compartmentalize the given world into a pre-established and fixed system, is clearly tied to what is, to all appearances, an optimistic and orthodox vision of things according to which history proceeds according to wholly foreseeable and reassuring scenarios" (p. 294).

If the sequential historical progression, as suggested by both Gomel and Salvestroni, is being questioned in the novel, then Strugatskys' representation of history seems to favor the cyclical model. I propose that, in *Hard to be a God*, the Strugatskys not only disagree with the Marxist theoretical approach to history and historical progress, but in fact depict a completely different view of history: history, for them, is unpredictable and cannot be put into a predetermined system. Moreover, history, for the Strugatsky brothers, is a cyclical phenomenon that constantly repeats itself. In this sense, their comprehension of history echoes Nietzschean theory on the eternal recurrence.

The Eternal Return and The Concept of History

The idea of the eternal return was first proposed by Eastern philosophers and analyzed at length by a French political activist Louis Blanqui in his work *Eternity via the Stars* about ten years before Friedrich Nietzsche developed this idea in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Blanqui writes:

Here, nonetheless, lies a great drawback: there is no progress . . . What we call 'progress' is confined to each particular world, and vanishes with it. Always and everywhere in the terrestrial arena, the same drama, the same setting, on the same narrow stage—a noisy humanity infatuated with its own grandeur, believing itself to be the universe and living in its prison as though

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in some immense realm, only to founder at an early date along with its globe, which has borne with the deepest disdain the burden of human arrogance. The same monotony, the same immobility, on other heavenly bodies. The universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in place. In infinity, eternity performs—imperturbably—the same routines. (as cited in Benjamin, 1921/2004, p. 26)

Nietzsche further explored the concept of the universe and history repeating itself in his famous work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883/1972). During a conversation between the dwarf and Zarathustra, Zarathustra explains the way history and universe works:

All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle . . . Must not all things that can run have already run along this lane? Must not all things that can happen have already happened, been done, run past? . . . For all things that can run must also run once again forward along this lane. And his slow spider that creeps along in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you at this gate whispering together, whispering of eternal things—must we not all have been here before? And must we not return and run down that other lane out before us, down that long, terrible lane—must we not return eternally? (p. 178-179)

To elaborate, the theory of the eternal return is grounded in the idea that the number of events in the universe is limited, and yet the time itself is endless. Thus, the events occurring in history are bound to repeat themselves an infinite number of times and recur over and over again. Ultimately, a combination of every event will be completed and repeated an unlimited number of times in an infinite number of combinations. Thus, according to this theory, time is cyclical and doesn't follow a linear trajectory.

The Idea of the Eternal Return in *Hard to Be a God*

The return of history becomes evident in this novel and in fact occurs on two levels. Within the plot level, the story literally unfolds in a historical time that has reversed itself, and the main protagonist, who represents modernity and everything it entails, has to live and survive in a civilization that is still in the "backward" medieval phase of development. This experience compels the protagonist to reevaluate his ideals and principles, ignites doubt about the efficacy of his mission, and challenges his faith in the Marxist theory of history and progress. Such displacement or "estrangement," which is considered one of the main features of the SF genre, according to Jameson (2005), "enacts and enables a structurally unique 'method' for apprehending the present as history, and this is irrespective of the 'pessimism' or 'optimism' of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization" (p. 288). He explains that, living in

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the postmodern world, we are unable to experience present as history due to the weakening sense of historicity and a cynical belief that change is no longer possible, and thus SF's main function is to make us feel estranged from our own present, enabling us to give meaning to the current moment in history. This is precisely what the Strugatskys' SF novum in this novel accomplishes.

On a thematic level, the return of history happens, as I already discussed above, when the fascist putsch suddenly occurs within the medieval setting and overthrows the King, proclaiming its supreme power. Fascism's anachronistic emergence gestures toward the idea that Fascism in this novel is a metaphor for any totalitarian state that oppresses and subjugates the masses, controls creativity and art, and exterminates anyone who defies its laws. In that regard, Fascism is not connected to any particular historical period, and in fact can appear and reappear at any historical time. Rumata admits himself that "wherever grayness triumphs, black robes come to power" (p. 171), meaning that the Middle Ages can appear again, creating ripened conditions for the Grays to dominate culture, appeasing and indoctrinating the masses, and ultimately "inviting" Fascism to come back again. As Gomel astutely sums up, "Gray is the color of self-satisfied mediocrity, while black is the color of terror and repression" ("The Poetics of Censorship" p. 95). Similarly, Dmitriy Volodihin and Gennadiy Prashkevich, in their work *Brat'ia Strugatskie* (2012), also conclude that in *Hard to be a God*, "the apparent Middle Ages be-

come simply the code message for socio-psychological roots of totalitarianism: vulgarity, ignorance and dullness" ("Мнимое средневековье оказывается попросту кодовым обозначением социально-психологических корней тоталитаризма: мещанства, невежества и тупости") (p. 115).

The main protagonist thus faces a difficult task: to observe the barbarities happening right in front of his eyes without being able to help. As a consequence, as he becomes disenchanted with Marxist ideals, Anton also becomes disillusioned with himself as he finds out that there is nothing he can do to help these people. He is forced, as Dmitriy Volodihin and Gennadiy Prashkevich (2012) underline, "to look at all this, tolerate it and coldly play the role of God-observer" ("А прогрессор вынужден все это видеть, терпеть, холодно играть роль бога-созерцателя") (p. 112-113). Thus, when Anton realizes that Marxist theory fails, he suddenly also comes to realization that the laws of history—which he thought he knew so well—do not fit in the theory of historical materialism. Thus, he begins to have doubts regarding the role of God he has to play on this planet (when Earthlings arrived on Arkanar, they have convinced everyone that they were Gods in order to explain their superior knowledge, better physical health, and skillful use of weapons). This is where his internal struggle begins, and the ethical dimension of the novel unfolds. As Gomel (2004) asserts, Anton, as a representative of the Soviet New Man, at the beginning perceives himself to be "the judge of time and

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history" with absolute conviction that he will be able to materialize the Marxist theory of history and test its efficiency on this society (p. 364). Gomel writes that the Soviet New Man "marches along the one-way road of historical progress toward the revelation of his own glorious self," hence their Godlike status. However, she concludes that "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" (p. 362). Throughout the novel, Anton is caught in a perpetual dilemma: to help these people or not. As a historian (and "God"), he is not allowed to directly interfere in anything that is happening. However, as a human being, he cannot remain indifferent to the injustices around him. He desperately wants to help, but at the same time, he doesn't want to sink to their level, to respond to violence with violence: "I was this close to cutting them down, he suddenly realized. If they hadn't cleared out, I would have cut them down . . . Some god! Turning into a savage . . . Just an outburst . . . After all, I'm human, and humans are still animals" (p. 71).

The growing disillusionment in his own powers prevents him from remaining God, as Anton in the final scene of the novel can no longer simply be an idle God-observer. When his girlfriend is killed, he denounces his Godlike status and by doing that, he goes against the theories, the goal of their mission, and the Marxist conception of history itself. As Mark Amusin (2005) suggests: "The protagonist's emotional breakdown in the end should be

interpreted as an act of self-will, as a rebellion against the laws of history—and simultaneously against instructions, dry theories, directions from the authority" ("Эмоциональный срыв героя в финале нужно рассматривать именно как акт своеволия, как бунт против законов истории—и одновременно против инструкций, сухих теорий, указаний вышестоящих инстанций"). Indeed, his violence implies refusal to accept a position of power. By shedding blood and mercilessly killing the enemy in order to have revenge for the death of his girlfriend, Anton embraces his humanity and fights as a human being, not a God or an experimenting historian. For Anton, to be a God means to lose his own humanity, to suppress his pity and not interfere when blood is being shed daily. In the end, Anton is just a human being who wants to help his brothers to overcome oppression and violence: he simply cannot remain an idle observer anymore, cannot be a God. As Anton contemplates when the fascist violence commences all over the Arkanarian kingdom: "My brothers, thought Rumata. I'm yours, I'm the flesh of your flesh! He suddenly felt with tremendous force that he was no god, shielding the fireflies of reason with his hands, but instead a brother helping a brother, a son saving a father" (p. 148). This is where the ethical dimension emerges: to be a progressor and consequently a God, one must disregard his humanity. Anton chooses not to do so.

If the Strugatskys are correct in their assessment that violence and oppression can come back at any time unexpectedly, why is

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this happening? Why is the Fascist regime, in its various manifestations, returning to history?

Walter Benjamin in his essay "Critique of Violence" (1921/2004) explains that the sovereign state in general has to utilize violence to legitimize itself. Benjamin distinguishes between two types of violence as a means: law-making and law-preserving violence. If violence "lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity" (p. 243). The law-making violence is a type of violence used to legally declare war, terror, etc., while the law-preserving violence is realized through the state institutions such as police force to ensure the citizens' obedient enactment of the state law. These two types of violence constitute legal violence or "militarism," which Benjamin defines as "the compulsory use of violence as a means towards the ends of the state" (p. 241). However, these two kinds of violence are sometimes difficult to differentiate because they depend on one another to function successfully. State police is a good example of this mutual dependence. While the main function of police is to preserve the law, it does so by creating new laws and regulations. Hence, the power of the police that uses violence legally to protect and legitimize the state is "formless, like its nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states" (p. 243).

Along the same lines, Susan Buck-Morss in her work *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000) comments on the legal use of violence by the state and contends that state's violence is really a self-fulfilling cycle, because those who

want to challenge the existing order of things are punished by the law-preserving violence, thereby making it difficult to ever break the cycle of violence: "By the exercise of violence over those who challenge the existing law . . . the latter reaffirms itself. But in this very violence something 'rotten in the law is revealed,' not its justice but its monopoly of the (violent, physical) power to determine, in the last analysis, what justice is" (p. 6). Buck-Morss goes on to suggest that the state can grant itself absolute power through state violence: "For it is the real possibility of war and the threat of a common enemy that constitute the state not merely as a legal entity but as a sovereign entity, the legitimate embodiment of the collective with the power to wage war in its name. As sovereign of the collective, it has sovereignty over the collective, with the right to order to their death the very citizens in whose name it rules" (p. 8). Thus, here lies the destructive power of the state law: it can annihilate its own citizens if the state—the embodiment of the collective—decides that it would be beneficial somehow for the collective body. And this is exactly the kind of violence that Fascism exhibits in this novel.

But what social stratum in the collective body of citizens would want to question the perpetual cycle of state violence that has almost become seamless in our everyday life? As Strugatskys suggest in this text, only an intellectual has the capacity to go against the flow and question the status quo, thereby putting the government's existence and order in jeopardy. In one of Anton's internal mono-

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logues, in which he contemplates the fate of the Arkanarians and its oppressed intelligentsia, he openly expresses his opinion of the crucial role of intellectuals in any society. He says:

If they were all identical, there would be reason to throw up your hands and lose hope. But they were still people, the bearers of the spark of reason. And here and there in their midst, the fires of the incredibly distant and inevitable future would kindle and blaze up. They would kindle despite it all. Despite all their seeming unworthiness. Despite the oppression. Despite the fact that they were being trampled with boots . . . They didn't know that the future was on their side, that the future was impossible without them. They didn't know that in a world belonging to the terrible ghosts of the past, they were the only manifestation of the future—that they were an enzyme, a vitamin in society's organism. If you destroy this vitamin, society will rot . . . Without arts and general culture, the country loses its capacity for self-criticism, begins to encourage faulty tendencies, starts to constantly spawn hypocrites and scum, develops consumerism and conceit in its citizens. (p. 145-146)

Thus, any society, according to the Strugatskys, no matter how oppressed it is, is able to produce those "sparks"—thinking people who can rise up against the docile crowd and

challenge the current ideology in order to ensure a just future for all. Consequently, since the intelligentsia has the capacity for critical assessment of the state and state policies, it undoubtedly threatens the legitimacy of the state. When that happens, the state has to implement violence to reaffirm its sovereignty and suppress any criticism by attacking the intellectuals. And this is how the return of Fascism occurs. Nonetheless, Strugatskys' message here is to never give up, to never become too complacent, be vigilant if certain rights are being slowly taken away from you, and fight back. As Anton proclaims during his conversation with Budach, in a powerful speech apparently aimed directly at the Strugatskys' readers, the majority of whom belonged to the intelligentsia: "And I cannot figure out why you, the keepers and only holders of high knowledge, are so hopelessly passive. Why do you meekly allow yourself to be despised, thrown in jails, burned at the stake? Why do you separate the meaning of your life, the pursuit of knowledge—from the practical requirements of life, the struggle against evil?" (p. 205-206).

To sum up, the Strugatskys' brilliantly written novel *Hard to be a God* provides us with a social blueprint for communist future with a warning that unless the state stops oppressing the intellectuals, the utopian future of the Soviet Union is in jeopardy. The novel's commentary on history illustrates the Strugatskys' disenchantment with contemporary Marxist historical theories and their refusal to accept the Marxist interpretation regarding how utopia can be achieved. Their powerful message that



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Fascism can suddenly strike any society unpredictably at any given time remains apropos in our current global situation, in which right-wing movements seem to be on the rise, prompting us to not disregard the warning signs and to not be hesitant to defy it.

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