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FOR THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL “PALIMPSEST”

REMAINS FROM THE ALIENS IN THE NOVEL *ROADSIDE PICNIC* BY A. AND B. STRUGATSKY

Zarko Milenic

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Abstract: Arkady and Boris Strugatsky are the most prominent and best-known Russian writers of the science fiction genre, both in the post-Soviet states and further abroad. Their most popular and most widely translated novel is *Roadside Picnic* [Piknik na obochine]. It was first published serially in 1971 in the Leningrad journal *Avrora*. It became more popular after the famous film adaptation *Stalker* by Andrey Tarkovsky, realized in 1979 and the 1986 Chernobyl disaster when specific “Zone” was created, so the Strugatsky brothers become prophets Zone of a kind. Afterwards, the terms – “Zone” and “Stalker” (a brave and criminal man who goes to Zone to find specific artifacts there in order to sell them to collectors and others) – became known all over the World.

In this article the author writes about the theme of the first contact in the genre of science fiction on the example of this novel where there is no communication between human and alien civilization. However, the Visitors from outer space left artifacts which have great influence on people on Earth, especially in places near the Zone. For the purpose of this article English translation of the novel and reviews by Russian and foreign authors, letters and work diaries by Strugatsky’s have been used.

Keywords: *Strugatsky brothers; Science fiction; Aliens Zone; First contact.*

Introduce

‘First contact’ is a very frequent theme in science fiction texts. In these texts, writers describe encounters between humans with extraterrestrial beings from other planets. This term was first established in science fiction in Murray Leinster’s novelette *First Contact* (1945). The first famous example of the theme is *The War of the Worlds* (1898) by Herbert George Wells (it is interesting to note that in 1967 the Strugatskys published a novella *The Second Invasion from Mars* [Vtoroe nashestvie marsian], which is a parody on the novel by Wells). The following titles are also well-known examples of this theme in science fiction: *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) by Ray Bradbury, *Solaris* (1961) by Stanislaw Lem, *The Gods Themselves* (1972) by Isaac Asimov, *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) by Ursula K. Le Guin, *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973) by Arthur C. Clarke and *Contact* (1985) by Carl Sagan.

The best-known Russian novels featuring that theme are *Aelita* (1923) by Alexei Tolstoy and *Andromeda Nebula* [Tumannost' Andromedy] (1957) by Ivan Yefremov.

From the beginning of their very successful collaboration, Strugatskys made a frequent use of the first contact theme in their works. Their novel *Roadside Picnic* was first published as a book in the collection of three works entitled *Unappointed Meetings* [Nenaznachennye vstrechi] (1980). The other two are *Space Mowgli* [Malysh] and *From Beyond* [Izvne].

As Ursula K. Le Guinn (2012) writes in the second English translation of *Roadside Picnic*: “Roadside Picnic is a ‘first contact’ story with a difference. Aliens have visited the Earth and gone away again, leaving behind them several landing areas (now called the Zones) littered with their refuse. The picnickers have gone; the pack rats, wary but curious, approach the crumpled bits of cellophane, the glittering pull tabs from beer cans, and try to carry them home to their holes.” (p. 7).

She continues stating that: “In the traditional first contact story, communication is achieved by courageous and dedicated spacemen, and thereafter ensues an exchange of knowledge, a military triumph, or a big-business deal. Here, the visitors from space, if they noticed our existence at all, were evidently uninterested in communication; perhaps to them we were savages, or perhaps pack rats. There was no communication; there can be no understanding.” (p. 7).

Georgy Gurevich (1983) has similar stance as Ursula K. Le Guin. Regarding the novel *Roadside Picnic*, he writes that “a supercivilization is most likely deeply indifferent to the concerns of people. The Earth is like an anthill to them. They arranged a stop, littered, flew about their business, and left to humans the opportunity to spend decades trying to guess the meaning of their remains and scraps.” (p. 80).

Stanislaw Lem (1983) believed that with *Roadside Picnic* the Strugatsky brothers were moving away from the traditions of the science fiction genre. According to Lem their novel is based on two concepts: first “strategy of preserving the mystery of the visitors” and second “pertains to humanity’s reaction to the landing”. (p. 321) The world continues to exist as before. The human reaction to miracles is both legal and illegal. In the laboratories of xenological institutes, experiments are being carried out with “magnetic traps” found in the Zones.

Such cases of a first contact without an encounter are very rare in the science fiction genre. We might recall something similar from the novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) by Arthur C. Clarke. In that novel, humans found a large crystalline monolith on Earth, the Moon and Saturn’s satellite Iapetus. A mysterious alien civilization uses that enormous artifact to investigate worlds across the galaxy and, when possible, to encourage the development of intelligent life. The monolith from the novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* by Arthur C. Clarke is the remain of an alien civilization, as are the strange artifacts in the novel *Roadside Picnic* by the Strugatskys. The novel by Clarke is based on his short stories “The Sentinel” (1948) and “Encounter in the Dawn” (1953). It is interesting to note that the novel *Roadside Picnic* is based on their story “Forgotten Experiment” [Zabytyi

eksperiment] (1959). There is another parallel: the famous director Andrey Tarkovsky made the famous adaptation - *Stalker* (1979), based on *Roadside Picnic*, while the famous director Stanley Kubrick also made a masterpiece with same title as Clarke's novel. The difference is that the novel by Clarke was written and published after the film by Kubrick. The screenplay was written by Clarke and Kubrick. For the film *Stalker*, the screenplay was written by the Strugatskys but Tarkovsky was quite involved in working on it as well.

Artifacts left by Visitors in the Zones

The book *Strugatsky. Research materials: letters, work diaries 1967-1971* [Strugackie, Materialy k issledovaniyu: pis'ma, rabochie dnevniki 1967-1971] (2013) is a source of information on the writing of the novel *Roadside Picnic*. The Strugatskys wrote the novel from January to November 1971, but the first mention and the beginning of the future novel can be seen in this book, and it is dated February 20th, 1970. It states: "Monkey and tin can. Thirty years after the visit of the aliens, the remains of the trash thrown away by them are the subject of hunting and searching, research and misfortune, the rise of superstition, a department trying to take power, based on the possession of these remains, an organization that seeks to destroy them (knowledge taken from heaven is useless and harmful; any find can only bring bad use). Seekers are considering to be sorcerers. The fall of the authority of science. Abandoned biosystems (almost discharged battery), living corpses of various eras." (p. 488-489).

A reader of the novel *Roadside Picnic* can immediately associate this initial note with the plot in the novel.

Monkey: An animal that is being compared here to a human who found the left-behind tin can. The monkey (*human*) does not know how to use the tin can which is being discarded by super-intelligent beings. As Friedrich Nietzsche (2006) writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [Also sprach Zarathustra], the monkey is to the human as the human is to overman (*übermensch*): "What is the ape to a human? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And that is precisely what the human shall be to the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment." (p. 6).

Monkey is also the nickname of the daughter of the main character in the novel, Redrick Schuhart, because she has a lot of hair all over her body like a monkey.

The aliens are extraterrestrial beings that left lot of mysterious things behind after their short roadside picnic on Earth and, they remained mysterious.

"Trash" probably refers to the objects that remain after the picnic. For humans, this so-called trash is something magical and very valuable, akin to the mirrors in the hands of the first white men seen by the Native Americans on the newly discovered continent.

A discharged battery is an eternal battery and scientists cannot explain this fantastic feature or other things in the Zone.

Living Corpses are the Zone influenced men in neighboring cities like Harmont, where the plot takes place. The zombies over there are not dangerous as in horror novels.

Arkady and Boris started writing the novel *Roadside Picnic* on January 16, 1971, in the village Komarovo near Leningrad where they ordinarily used to write together. First, they made detailed plan of the novel for every chapter and listed the names of the characters. They also mention strange artifacts. Later on these strange things were given interesting names by stalkers. The most interesting of them are:

Golden Sphere (Wish Machine): As Burbridge, one of the main characters in the novel, states: “I found it. Lots of stories told about it. Told some myself. That it’ll grant any wish. Yeah, right - any wish!” (Strugatsky, [2012] p. 64) Here we can see the influence of fairy tales as in their other novels, such as *Tale of the Troika* [Skazka o Troike] (1968). “Wish Machine” is the title of the first version of the screenplay by the Strugatskys for the film *Stalker*.

Redrick describes his impression of the Wish Machine as: “It lay where it had fallen. It might have tumbled out of some huge pocket or gotten lost, rolling away, during a game between some giants – it hadn’t been placed here, it was lying around, just like all the empties, bracelets, batteries, and other junk leftovers from the Visit.” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 180).

White ring: Possibly a unique item found by Redrick. Of that artifact scientist Dr. Pillman states that it “instantly disproved several recently thriving theories and gave rise to some entirely new ideas.” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 135) It is the size of an ordinary ring. Once spun, it never stops spinning.

Death lamp: Of that artifact Richard Noonan says: “a stalker by the name of Stephen Norman, nicknamed Four-Eyes, brought out of the Zone a device that, as far as anyone could tell, consisted of a ray-emitting system fatal to Earth organisms. The Four-Eyes was attempting to sell this instrument to the Institute. They couldn’t agree on the price. Four-Eyes left for the Zone and never came back. The current whereabouts of the instrument are unknown – the guys at the Institute are still tearing out their hair about it. Hugh, from the Metro-pole, who is well known to you, had offered to buy it for any sum that could fit on a check.” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 113).

Empties: Redrick Schuhart explains that these are “two copper disks the size of a saucer, a quarter inch thick, about eighteen inches apart, and not a thing between the two. I mean, nothing whatsoever, zip, nada, zilch. You can stick your hand between them maybe even your head, if the thing has unhinged you enough – nothing but empty space, thin air. And despite this, there must be something there, a force field of some sort, because so far no one’s managed to push these disks together or pull them apart either.” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 16).

Black Sparks: Strange black beads. The physicist Dr. Valentine Pillman explains: “If you shine a light at such a bead, the light will be emitted after a pause, and the length of the pause depends on the weight of the ball, its size, and a number of other parameters, while the frequency of the emitted light is always less than its original frequency.” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 134).

Dick the Tramp: Pillman explains that this artifact is “hypothetical windup doll which is causing havoc in the ruins of the factory. And happy ghosts are a kind of dangerous turbulence that can happen in certain regions of the Zone.” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 135).

Bracelets: A person who wears them becomes healthier over time.

And there are many other artifacts, mainly with unknown functions.

Some of the phenomena in the Zone are:

Happy Ghosts: As dr. Pillman explains, these are “a kind of dangerous turbulence that can happen in certain regions of the Zone.” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 135).

Graviconcentrate (in Russian – komarinaya plesh’, mosquito bald): A spot that exhibits extremely strong gravity, capable of crushing a person into a pancake.

Living corpses: Autonomous replicas of people buried in cemeteries inside the Zone before the Visitation. Pillman says about them: “These corpses of yours do have one curious property -autonomous viability. For example, you can cut off their leg, and the leg will keep walking. Well, not actually walking but, in any case, living. Separately. Without any physiological salt solutions.” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 138).

Silver cobweb: – Similar to a large spider web. For some people, like the scientist Kirill, it is invisible. He backs into it and dies later of a heart attack.

Hell slime (in Russian – ved’min studen’, witches jelly): This is a substance that penetrates any organic material, as well as plastic, metal, and concrete. Only special ceramic vessels seem to contain it. Almost everything that it touches transforms into more “Witches Jelly”. It seems to collect in low-lying areas such as basements. When Stalker Vulture Burbridge falls in it, his legs are transformed into rubber.

Shadows: They are warped and twisted, in the opposite direction of where they should be. Vulture Burbridge claims that this phenomenon is “strange but harmless”. (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 36).

Grinder: It is almost invisible. Anything that enters in this area instantly twists, deforms, and breaks into pieces. It is located across the only path leading to the Golden Sphere. It is activated when it gets its victim and becomes inactive for a long time, allowing those walking behind the victim and safely pass through and come to the Golden Sphere.

Explaining of the Picnic of Visitors

Roadside Picnic features a very interesting conversation between the scientist Dr. Pillman and another main character in the novel, Richard H. Noonan, 51-year-old, businessman.

When Noonan asked Dr. Pillman about the Visitors, Dr. Pillman answers: “We now know that for humanity, the Visit has largely passed without a trace. For humanity everything passes without a trace.” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 126). In response to Noonan’s question – “Who they are, what they wanted, if they’ll come back...” (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 127) – Dr. Pillman presents hypotheses. The first hypothesis is of the roadside picnic: “a forest, a country road, a meadow. A car pulls off the road into the meadow and unloads young men, bottles, picnic baskets, girls, transistor radios, cameras... A fire is lit, tents are pitched, music is played. And in the morning, they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that were watching the whole night in horror crawl out of their shelters. And what do they see? An oil

spill, a gasoline puddle, old spark plugs and oil filters strewn about... Scattered rags, burned-out bulbs, someone has dropped a monkey wrench. The wheels have tracked mud from some godforsaken swamp... and, of course, there are the remains of the campfire, apple cores, candy wrappers, tins, bottles, someone's handkerchief, someone's penknife, old ragged newspapers, coins, wilted flowers from another meadow..." (Strugatsky, [2012] p. 129).

The second hypothesis "is that the Visit hasn't happened yet, that the real Visit is yet to come. Some higher intelligence came to Earth and left us containers with samples of their material culture. They expect us to study these samples and make a technological leap, enabling us to send back a signal indicating we're truly ready for contact." (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 130).

The third is that "Visit did take place, but it is not by any means over. We're actually in contact as we speak, we just don't know it. The aliens are holed up in the Zones and are carefully studying us, simultaneously preparing us for the 'time of cruel miracles.'" (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 130-131).

Afterwards, Noonan says that if the Visit is a prelude to contact, he understands the remains left behind by the Visitors, such as the bracelets and empties, but he can't understand the slime and other terrible phenomena.

Dr. Pillman also doesn't understand this. Later he states how he "prefer[s] cautious skepticism. Judging from what we've already acquired, there is a whole spectrum of possibilities, and nothing definite can be said." (Strugatsky, 2012, p. 133).

Gennady Prashkevich (2009) wrote that the Strugatskys themselves considered their novella "Escape Attempt" [Popytka k begstvu] (1962) to be a turning point. They said: "This is our first work in which we felt all the sweetness and magical power of a REFUSAL OF EXPLANATIONS. Any explanations – sci-fi, logical, purely scientific, or even pseudoscientific. How sweet, it turns out, to tell the reader: THAT happened and SOMETHING, but WHY it happened, HOW it happened, where and what it came from – it is not important! For this is not the point, but something completely different, in the very thing about which the novella is..." (p. 261). The same can be said about the novel *Roadside Picnic*.

In his foreword to the first translating of the novel into English, Theodore Sturgeon (1977) writes that "[the] nature of these discards, products of an utterly alien technology, defies most earthly logic, to say nothing of earthly analytical science, and their potential is limitless." (p. 6).

Brian W. Aldis and David Wingrove (1988) wrote that the Strugatskys "often use a fibular style, both are intensely, almost obsessively logical (a tortuous, almost Kafkaesque logic in the best of both." (p. 494).

Stuart Carter (2021) noticed that "the science-fictional elements are ever-present, and to be sure they're the turning point of the story, but they're far from the gee-whiz pyrotechnics that a fair percentage of the genre relies on. The Zones are places of dark magic and miracles, almost inevitably fatal, where nothing makes sense."

Conclusion

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky wrote their important and well-known novel *Roadside Picnic* in 1971 and published it for the first time in 1972. The novel was first translated into English in 1977 and was later translated into many other languages. The main problem in the novel is a description of an atypical and unrealized contact between humans and more intelligent extraterrestrial lifeforms. These visitors spent a short time on Earth and left strange artifacts and phenomena behind in the Zones. For the scientists and other people in the novel, these remains are a mystery. The Strugatsky brothers are great writers, and they did not leave answers to their numerous readers and critics. They left the readers the possibility to find out the answer themselves. The readers can attempt to ask what the purpose of the Visitors and all that they left behind in the Zones was. That manner is untypical in ordinary science fiction genre, especially in pieces by American authors. The Strugatskys broke clichés of the science fiction genre and with this literary masterpiece they made a step further towards the category of best writers of 20th century.

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