

Roadside Picnic: Cold War Anxieties and Cultural Legacies

"For humanity everything passes without a trace. Of course, it's possible that by randomly pulling chestnuts out of this fire, we'll eventually stumble on something that will make life on Earth completely unbearable. That would be bad luck. But you have to admit, that's a danger humanity has always faced." He waved away the cigarette smoke and smiled wryly. "You see, I've long since become unused to discussing humanity as a whole. Humanity as a whole is too stable a system, nothing upsets it." (Strugatsky & Strugatsky 2012: 128).

There is a certain poeticness to this quote from *Roadside Picnic*, the 1972 novel written by the Soviet science fiction authors Boris and Arkady Strugatsky. It subtly highlights overarching anxieties found not only in the Soviet Union, but around the globe, of the prospect of experimenting with powers and technology - such as nuclear weapons - that humanity did not yet fully understand the ramifications of at the time. It is an exploration of the overall relationship between humanity and the threat of the unknown. But it also highlights the allure of the unknown, and why the unknown can serve as an addiction that constantly invites human curiosity.

In this essay I will argue that the seminal work of the Strugatsky brothers, *Roadside Picnic*, and its success as a piece of Soviet Cold War fiction, is culturally significant due to not only the themes that it tackles, but also due to its lasting impacts and legacies in contemporary times with the rise of so-called "stalker" cultures around the world - with a focus on the prolific stalker culture that operates within the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine.

Nuclear Anxieties of the Cold War

The Strugatsky brothers were a sibling author duo, who grew up in the era of Joseph Stalin, and who penned many successful *nauchnaia fantastika* (science fiction) novels during the height of the Cold War. The brothers published their first novel, *The Land of Crimson Clouds*, a story about Soviet cosmonauts establishing a presence on the planet Venus, in 1959. Following Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet authors were permitted a greater degree of freedom following the heavy restrictions that Stalin placed on the arts and literature - such as the formation of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1932 (Medish 1966: 157-158). The Union of Soviet Writers was a singular large union of all Soviet writers that absorbed all others into itself. It allowed the Communist Party to push their single ideological literary method of socialist realism - a method which could change at any given moment according to the ephemeral everyday politics of the Soviet Union (Simon 2004: 390). Any deviation from its decreed rules constituted a metaphorical literary suicide for authors. The newfound freedom after Stalin's death, however, allowed authors to experiment with new directions, themes and characterisation that they were not afforded previously - though, of course, there were still limitations and expectations to conform to, something that the Strugatsky brothers became accustomed to - something that Boris Strugatsky spoke openly about in the afterword of the 2012 edition of *Roadside Picnic* (Strugatsky 2012: 203-206). Over the course of four decades, the brothers saw their works endure Soviet censorship, be translated into English and many other languages, and persist onwards through the periods of Perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union itself (Alaniz 2013: 204).

Roadside Picnic was first published in the literary magazine *Avrora* in 1972. The plot is concerned with the aftermath of an extraterrestrial visitation to the Earth, and the human reaction and response to it. The aliens land in a variety of places around the globe for a brief time, before moving on without any form of interference. These areas where the visitations

took place become known as “Zones”, and are cordoned off to the general public so that they will not be disturbed. The alien visitors leave behind a variety of relics and artefacts within the Zones which ultimately draw the attention of those who would like to acquire them due to their potential value. As a result, so-called “stalkers” venture into the Zones in order to retrieve and sell these curios on the black market.

At its core the novel centres around questions over the value and insignificance of human life when placed in the grander context of a universe that is indifferent to human existence. The concept of a “roadside picnic” implies that the aliens merely stopped on Earth before moving on to somewhere new, and more important; unphased and unconcerned at the human presence on the planet. It serves as an allegory for what could potentially happen on a family road trip, wherein the car may pull up at a point of interest or beauty in order to take in the sights. The family may have something to eat, before moving on to their final destination. In doing so, the family may leave behind rubbish and debris that, in their eyes, is inconsequential and meaningless, but, to the wildlife of the area, could prove to be of curiosity and potential lethality.

This emphasis on the unknown contrasts with the broader anxieties of the Cold War at the time of - and the decade following - the novel’s publication. The threat of nuclear war and annihilation, from the perspective of the Soviet Union, was one of increased pessimism - but also an optimism that it may be averted if the correct measures were taken. Studies have shown that Soviet children in particular were more likely to be exposed to the concept of nuclear weapons at a younger age when contrasted with their American counterparts (Chivian, Mack, Waletzky, Lazaroff, Doctor & Goldenring 1986: 490). This ultimately created a population who were more in tune with the anxieties associated with the unknown that could wreak destruction upon the globe.

Yet the novel also tackles perceived anxieties and questions surrounding the true nature of the Western world. Given the insular nature of the Soviet Union, much of the population was unaware of what the West was truly like. The West became, in a sense, a mythologised, exotic and imagined place that predominantly existed in the mind of the individual. Much as the Zone could be described as a metaphor for the anxieties and dangers of the unknowns of nuclear weapons and radiation, so too could it be interpreted as a metaphor for the unknown - and potentially dangerous - West. It presents itself as an allegory of a space that is both within reach, but also unattainable and unknowable; a space that is both internal and external to reality, and is interpreted through the mind and imagination (Yurchak 2005: 158).

The Zone takes on the role as a stage for the exploration of the Cold War anxieties that people experienced. The artefacts within the Zone are - for the most part - not understood by the stalkers who venture into the Zone to retrieve them. Each artefact may have different interpretations of what their intended usage is, with some interpretations turning into legends passed from stalker to stalker over the years. One of the most sought after artefacts that stalkers seek out is the Golden Sphere - an object that is said to grant the wishes and desires of those who reach it, but which is guarded by a phenomena known as the "meat grinder" - which contorts and deforms the body of anyone unlucky enough to step foot within its radius. The meat grinder itself is the most prominent comparison to the dangers of radiation within the novel; a force that is invisible and unseen. In contrast, however, the meat grinder is a force that is able to almost instantaneously kill and maim those who might venture too close to it, juxtaposed with radiation, where the effects are not immediately noticeable.

There is no explicit reason for these artefacts and phenomena to be situated where they are within the Zone. They are described as being litter, rubbish and debris. After the

visitation they were not placed in the Zone strategically, and they were not placed there for any grander reason. They are, to the aliens who left them behind, inconsequential and meaningless.

The threat from these artefacts and phenomena - such as the aforementioned meat grinder - is mostly an invisible one. Their alien origin renders humanity completely unable to comprehend them until the damage has already been done. Some of the characters pass off some of the artefacts and phenomena as harmless, due to the absence of any immediately noticeable effects on their bodies. One example of this is the strange way in which shadows appear and cast themselves within the Zone - wherein shadows are cast in directions or areas where they shouldn't be. The character of Vulture passes this phenomena off as being "...strange but harmless" (Strugatsky & Strugatsky 1972: 28). Parallels can once again be drawn between the unknown nature of the artefacts and phenomena of the Zone, and the invisible threat of radioactivity; a phenomenon that does not immediately make itself known, with its effects only manifesting days, months, or years after exposure.

Roadside Picnic may subtly reflect these anxieties by weaving metaphors and allegories throughout the plot - particularly those surrounding the concept of the unknown. But these anxieties and fears, predominantly concerning radiation, would come to manifest into reality in the mid-1980s with the Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine.

Cultural Legacies

Roadside Picnic has a multitude of legacies that have stemmed from it. As one of the most influential Soviet science fiction novels - becoming popular not just within Eastern Europe, but in the over twenty countries where it has been translated - the novel has an

enduring contemporary popularity, despite being released at the height of the Cold War. It serves to reinforce how notable the Strugatsky brothers are within the science fiction genre (Kluger 2004: 415). The novel itself went on to inspire the 1979 film *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky - which took many elements from the novel, though it repurposed them to create something unique and different. The novel has also inspired a series of successful video games from Ukrainian developer GSC Game World, titled *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, which in turn has led to celebrations of the game, and a dedicated community that has arisen out of it, celebrating stalker culture and - in 2009 - creating a festival dedicated to it in which the central city square of Kyiv was turned into a makeshift "exclusion zone" reminiscent of the games (Sokolova 2012: 1571). This contemporary popularity showcases that concepts of the Cold War still persist within the consciousness and, as such, the Cold War is still an ongoing and embodied experience.

This embodiment is not simply relegated to legacies that have inspired other media, but are also due to the contemporary influence of the novel on the creation of an entire subculture of young people. The moniker of "stalker", that was first popularised by *Roadside Picnic*, and Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, has become an umbrella term adopted by groups who seek out abandoned or off-limits places in order to explore them at their own leisure and on their own terms, as well as by outsiders to refer to them (Birns 2021: 36). The stalker subculture has become immensely popular over preceding decades, and one of the most popular hotspots of their activity is the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine. The Chernobyl disaster occurred on April 26, 1986, in what was the former Ukrainian SFSR - a part of the Soviet Union. On that day, reactor four at the Chernobyl power plant went into meltdown, resulting in an explosion and fire that released radioactive materials into the surrounding environment, heavily contaminating it, resulting in the formation of an off-limits area that persists to this day. Official guided tours of the Exclusion Zone were relatively common before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, but alongside these guided tours were the stalkers,

young Ukrainian men who would venture into the Exclusion Zone, either solo or as unofficial guides, and who would show those who were willing to risk danger another side of the Exclusion Zone they would not otherwise see outside of the jurisdiction of the official tours.

Of course, venturing into the Exclusion Zone illegally carries many risks - much like with the Zone of *Roadside Picnic*. However, instead of the perils of unpredictable artefacts of alien origin, the contemporary stalkers of the Exclusion Zone and those they explore with must contend with the potential of radiation exposure, or capture by the Exclusion Zone's many guard patrols. The risk of strontium poisoning from water sources is high when exploring off the beaten track, though many of the stalkers do drink from natural sources, and eat fruit that is flourishing on nearby trees (Balakjian 2019: 1). For tourists accompanying them, however, the stalkers have set up an elaborate system of caches which contain bottled water and long-life foods in order to provide nourishment.

As mentioned above, most of those who engage with the stalker subculture are young men - predominantly born after the Chernobyl disaster took place and, in some cases, after the fall of the Soviet Union. When asked why they engage in the lifestyle, many respond that they were looking to reconnect with the past, and be able to better comprehend the world that they were born into. The ruins of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, consisting of poisoned, decaying and detrital remains allows them to revisit a snapshot in time - of a world and an empire that no longer exists, but is still relevant to their lives (Balakjian 2019: 1).

There is a divide, however, between the experiences that the officially sanctioned tours of the Exclusion Zone offer to tourists, and the experiences that the stalkers may offer. The officially sanctioned tours are predominantly focused on those seeking out a "dark tourism" experience, as well as to indulge in a concept that Davies describes as "ruin porn" (Davies 2013: 122). Chernobyl is now seen as a tourist destination, the checkpoints into the

Exclusion Zone feature gift shops where tourists can acquire nuclear themed memorabilia to remember their trip. The region, despite the tragedy that occurred there, is a commodity. Chernobyl attracts tourists due to the fact that danger both feels, and arguably is, real here. The protective measures that the tour companies encourage visitors to wear reinforce this fact (Birns 2021: 26-27). The concept of ruin porn also dramatises spaces such as Chernobyl, but does not pause to reflect on the people who once lived there (Davies 2013: 123). For the enthusiastic tourist, Chernobyl is the most pertinent visual ruin that remains in contemporary times of the USSR. Critics of those who engage in the aesthetic pleasure that tourists derive from ruin porn perceive it as being devoid of any commentary and is seemingly driven only by a voyeuristic desire to trespass beyond the “no entry” signs in order to explore the dilapidated ruins (Riley 2017: 21).

The stalkers, however, offer an experience that is typically more intimate and human in nature. Instead of ticking off a list of sights on a checklist and then escaping out of the Exclusion Zone, they are more prone to seek out places of meaning and symbolism; places that may ultimately resonate with them personally (Balakjian 2019: 1). For some, returning to family homes - where pictures and portraits of family members still sit, untouched and undisturbed, serves to emphasise Chernobyl as a place that still embodies the souls of humanity. Chernobyl may be just one of many wounds on Ukraine, yet stalkers use it as a way to redefine and reinterpret it, allowing for a form of respite and healing. The stalkers use their unofficial tours to show that, despite the tragedy, the Exclusion Zone is a place that is thriving with life - as deer, boar and other wild animals roam freely with minimal human disruption (Balakjian 2019: 1). And that despite being one of the most contaminated places on the planet, the still and quiet city of Pripyat becomes the ideal place at night to stare off into the endless abyss of space, with no light pollution to obscure the view of the cosmos.

Stalker subculture sees the Exclusion Zone not as a place where one should dwell on the past, but as a place where the future can also be discovered. There is the allure of adventure, but also of flirting with danger - such as with guard patrols or radiation exposure. For some stalkers, the Exclusion Zone offers respite and quiet, where they are able to take in the beauty of life and see everything it has to offer without restriction. The accident that occurred at Chernobyl is - unlike the officially sanctioned tours - not at the forefront of their intent, with personal motivations and curiosity serving as the main reasons why they venture back into the Exclusion Zone, even with the risks concerned (Birns 2021: 40).

Conclusions

Roadside Picnic set the stage as one of the most popular pieces of fiction written during the Cold War. The Strugatsky brothers created a novel that highlighted many of the anxieties and fears that those in the Soviet Union - and around the globe - experienced at the time. The threat of the unknown, human value and existence, and an emphasis on the sensory and the effects of the invisible on the human body are subtly interspersed throughout their writing. Their contribution to the science fiction genre was so seminal that the legacy of the novel is still being felt today through not only other contemporary media, but also with the emergence of an entire subculture of stalkers.

For the stalkers of contemporary reality, however, the anxieties and fears of the Zone in *Roadside Picnic* are contrasted against the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone - which has become a place of healing, solitude and rediscovery. Whilst invisible dangers may remain, those who venture into the Exclusion Zone outside of the jurisdiction of official tours seek to reinterpret the disaster in a way that does not merely view Chernobyl as a ruin of an industry and an empire, but of a place to reconnect with the souls of those who lived there in order to better interpret the future.

To conclude with another quote, this time from the ending of *Roadside Picnic*:

“Look into my soul, I know—everything you need is in there. It has to be. Because I’ve never sold my soul to anyone! It’s mine, it’s human!” (Strugatsky & Strugatsky 2012: 193)

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