

Eastern-European science-fictional space through the general representability of the Other¹

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Introduction

The equally rich traditions of Anglo-American and Eastern-European science fiction have significant historical, ideological and individual differences, but rarely have they been comparatively, comprehensively set side-to-side: for example, Roger Luckhurst, in his thorough historical characterization and overview of science fiction (see Luckhurst 2005) focuses specifically solely on its Anglo-American field, whereas Darko Suvin's equally well-known chapter on Russian science fiction (see Suvin 1979: 243–269) draws only a few comparative lines with its Western counterpart. This can, of course, be reasoned with the monumental size of the task at hand: the (Anglo-)American and Eastern-European traditions have had fairly separate histories, they have developed in radically different ideological contexts and inhabited separate lingual spaces – over the times, and specifically in the earlier phases of their historical development, the interaction between the two was not particularly intense. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that both traditions – and especially the less explored and less thoroughly characterized Eastern-European one – would benefit from an *initial comparative approach*. An attempt at this is, precisely, the theoretical aim of the current article. With any luck, such a comparison could also reveal something characteristic about the generic tendencies of Science Fiction in general, and, on the final borderline, say something meaningful about the way fiction itself “works” with respect to reality.

First and foremost, the following article focuses on establishing and outlining the common comparative ground on which further research could take place – the aim is to flesh out the specific common notion which could be used for further characterization of the respective dominants of the two separate traditions. In the present survey, I establish this common ground on the notion of the general representability of the Other, the unrepresentable. An insight into the different dominant ways the Other/the Different/the Unknown is represented and treated in Eastern-European and (Anglo)-American science-fictional traditions is also telling with respect to the differences between the dominant creative (ideological) impulses behind them.

I begin with an overall discussion on the general possibilities and limitations of representing the unrepresentable, and on the possible general philosophical function of attempting to do so in fiction. I then narrow the focus to the specific nature of the manifestations of this attempt in science fiction. Finally, I arrive at the distinct ways these manifestations differ in Eastern-European (pre-1989) and (Anglo)-American

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science-fictional traditions. Due to lack of space and the initial nature of the research I exemplify this trajectory through the basic characteristics of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* and comparatively extrapolate its innermost tendencies to characterize the empirical dominants of both fields.

1. Space journeys, literary space and science fiction

People undertake journeys. A journey is a metaphor for life – at least this is what the relevant scholars tend to say. Among other things, people undertake journeys into space – all else aside, this is also a metaphor for life. Space exploration doesn't merely carry a scientific, political or economic importance. If one deduces everything directly pragmatic, space journeys also carry an exceptionally strong human meaning. From such an unconventional point of view, the global space effort reveals the hopeless but absolutely necessary idealism of human ambition: the immense everyday efforts, sacrifices, expenditure and the inevitable finitude of the outcome of the endeavour form a stark contrast with the apparent infinity and the final incomprehensibility of the outer space. Life without these endeavours and sacrifices seems almost unimaginable, but, nevertheless, such is the general balance of forces when one has made a determined decision to start a journey towards the Other, the Unknown, the Different, or, metaphorically speaking, "towards the distant stars". From the midst of the seemingly uninterrupted everyday bustle of the here-and-now, these efforts appear the least functional or pragmatic but also to the greatest extent humanly necessary.

It might be the same with the poetic and narrative efforts so often undertaken by writers or poets. Fiction also seems to be a certain kind of journey to another space which we would probably only designate as "real" in another modality – to a space that Maurice Blanchot would perhaps call The Space of Literature. These journeys are also often undertaken on the expense of enormous inner sacrifices. And they might also be considered pragmatically non-functional but nevertheless humanly absolutely necessary – without them, without the space of fiction, the human reality is also almost unimaginable.

One might risk with the metaphorical claim that fiction is a peculiar kind of effort to bring the distant stars closer to the here-and-now: to reduce the distance that separates us from the Other, the Different, the Unknown as much as possible. And the fictional journey also entails that same stark contrast which I already described above: a literary work in its singularity forms this contrast with the seemingly infinite expanse of the fictional outer space. No writing can fill this expanse any more than the constant adding-up of numbers can fill the infinitude. No work of literature is a closure in itself; reality in its mere necessity always demands for further explorations of the fictional space, for more writing, for another work. The gap that divides the humanity chained to the planet from the promise of freedom evoked by the perspective of travelling to outer space forms a self-evident analogy with the gap that divides time and eternity, Letter and Spirit, singularity and multiplicity, and so on, and so on. People probably crave towards outer space as

much as they crave towards some kind of eternity, towards the pure Spirit or infinity. The distant stars are seldom unattractive.

In the framework of my current research focus, this arbitrary analogy between outer and literary space is, of course, best manifested in the literary genre of science fiction where the space voyage is probably historically the most common thematic motif. One might say that in science fiction, the literary journey to another, indefinite modality is directly literalized and materialized – the Other, the Different or the Unknown is here immediately solidified to the inner “material” level of fictional reality. This way, science fiction might lend an explanatory force to the description of the nature of the journeys undertaken by literature in general.

2. The general limits of representation

And although it is in science fiction where the reader is most accustomed to expect to encounter unfamiliar or never-before-seen phenomena – alien creatures, technologies, ecological systems or space-times, and so on – the occurrence of the *properly* Other, the Different or the Unknown in science fiction is in fact quite rare (and the same, following the previous allegory, is also true in the case of space explorations, or of literature in general). Such a rarity is, first and foremost, due to the inevitable limits set to human expression by the nature of representation itself. (And on the final borderline, the word “representation” therefore designates the “apparatus” that enables fundamental access to reality – reality, in this respect, is all that which *presents itself*.) This is perhaps a trivial statement: it is impossible to represent anything which isn’t in and of itself always already anthropocentric or *a priori* perceivable according to human experience and values. A classic example is the chimera from Greek mythology. It is a monstrous, fire-breathing creature that has the body of a lioness, a tail that ends in a snake's head, and an additional head of a goat that arises on her back at the centre of her spine – superficially, therefore, a fantastic and alien creature, but by nature still composed of entirely familiar “spare parts”. And on a fundamental level, the same “familiarity in unknown’s clothing” is generally intrinsic to even the most incomprehensible representation: in order to be recognized as representation at all, that which is represented must in any case be already encoded to the language of human experience. (But the opposite is equally true: in order to be recognized as representation, all that which is represented must contain at least a minimal degree of “otherness”, or we would mistake it for reality as such and not its “second-level” representation – see also Freedman 2000: 21.)

On a narrower literary level, the real limits of representability become apparent in much more radical cases – when, for example, a literary text tries to convey something that truly cannot be perceived. Such is the case with Scottish writer David Lindsay who, already in his novel *Voyage to Arcturus* (1920) describes us colours that have never been seen before:

“What was particular about the large feathery ball floating in the air was its colour. It was an entirely new colour – not a new shade or combination, but a new primary

colour, as vivid as blue, red or yellow, but quite different. When he inquired, she told him that it was known as “ulfire”. Presently he met with a second new colour. This she designated “jale”. The sense impression caused in Maskull by these two additional primary colours can only be vaguely hinted at by analogy. Just as the blue is delicate and mysterious, yellow clear and unsubtle, and red sanguine and passionate, so he felt ulfire to be wild and painful, and jale dreamlike, devilish and voluptuous.” (Lindsay 1963: 53)

Lindsay’s undertaking is not *fully* successful: on the final borderline, he only manages to refer to the never-before-seen colour by a fictional word, and the reader is ultimately unable to envisage the described colour. That which is perceivable to the fictional character is, due to the insertion of fictional words, not perceivable to the reader of the fictional text. (As Fredric Jameson remarks, the fact that in this passage Lindsay attributes the perception of the colour to a human being is thereby also a science-fictional error because a human lacks the necessary sensory organ for the perception of this colour; Jameson 2005: 120) The problem of the overall literary representability of the radically Other, the Different, the Unknown presents itself precisely at this point: unless we represent the imperceivable by composing our literary works entirely out of fictional and therefore utterly incomprehensible words, *the very act of the lingual or figural description of the Unknown itself already transforms it into something familiar, graspable and homely*. According to this logic, the Other can only be something unrepresentable, something that cannot even be designated. But how to represent that which cannot be designated if language itself is *merely* an apparatus for designation?

3. Jean-François Lyotard on the representability of the unrepresentable

I do not hereby intend to provide definitive solutions to questions of such general nature, but an initial lead to a possible answer (or to possible further questions) is already present in Lindsay’s text: the presence of the Other, the Different, the Unknown can merely be *alluded to* by a *formal reference* which does not betray anything of the Unknown’s *essence or content*. (Lindsay, in the example at hand, achieves this by the inclusion of fictional words – designators which have no imaginable referent.) In order for the Unknown to remain Unknown, in order for it not to lose the quality of the radically Different, in order for it not to be reduced to the “familiarity in unknown’s clothing” of a Chimera-like construct, the potentially alien referent has to be tactfully held in the field of tension between the known and the unknown: on the level of “content”, it has to be *described* as little as possible; on the level of “form”, it has to be *alluded to* as strongly as possible.

On his own terms and in a different context, Jean-François Lyotard has described the opposite poles of this field of tension through the opposition between realism and the avant-garde (or what he calls “the modern art”). In a very broad distinction, Lyotard, speaking of the Kantian sublime, separates that which can be conceived from that which can be “presented” and defines the feeling of the sublime

as “a conflict [- - -] between the faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to “present something” (Lyotard 1992: 19). The feeling of the sublime is a feeling of the existence of that which cannot be (re)presented. On the basis of this distinction, Lyotard defines realism as the art which treats reality presuming “an accord between the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present an object” (Lyotard 1992: 19). In other words, realism presents only that part of the conceivable which can be presented. It treats the conceivable and the presentable as equals; everything that can be perceived can also be presented. (And therefore: “Realism [- - -] can be defined only by its intention of avoiding the question of reality implied in the question of art...”; see Lyotard 1992: 16) What Lyotard calls “modern art”, on the other hand, is that which focuses on solving the conflict inherent in the feeling of the sublime: it “devotes [itself] to presenting the existence of something unrepresentable” (Lyotard 1992: 20). It is focused on the effort of representing that which can be conceived but not presented; therefore, it treats the presentable as a subset of the conceivable. Lyotard questions this approach through the example of modern painting:

“Showing that there is something we can conceive of which we can neither see or show: this is the stake of modern painting. But how do we show something that cannot be seen? Kant himself suggests the direction to follow when he calls *formlessness*, the *absence of form*, a possible index to the unrepresentable. And, speaking of the empty *abstraction* felt by the imagination as it searches for a presentation of the infinite (another unrepresentable), he says that it is itself like a presentation of the infinite, its *negative presentation*. [- - -] For an outline of an aesthetic of sublime painting, there is little we need to add to these remarks: as painting, it will evidently “present” something, but negatively: it will therefore avoid figuration or representation; it will be “blank” like one of Malevich’s squares; it will make one see only by prohibiting one from seeing; it will give pleasure only by giving pain.” (Lyotard 1992: 20)

That which Lyotard calls “the modern art” expresses the “absence of form” and the “empty abstraction” felt by the imagination in the shape of an *absence of content* alluded to by *form as index*: “[T]he modern aesthetic is an aesthetic of the sublime, but it is nostalgic; it allows the unrepresentable to be invoked only as absent content, while form, thanks to its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or spectator material for consolation and pleasure.” The aesthetic of the sublime is that which “invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, which refuses the consolation of correct forms...” (Lyotard 1992: 23–24) The task of an artist working in such a spirit is “not to [- - -] *provide reality* but to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable” (Lyotard 1992: 24).

Returning now to the terms and context of literature in general and science fiction in particular, it can be said that such, then, is the doctrine of representing the unrepresentable: the unknown should not be conceded to the homely and familiar; that which under the opaque and impenetrable surface of the Other is in and of itself nothing, should not be betrayed in the text through an attempt of direct figuration or representation of content. The loyalty to the tactful maintenance of the Other can

only be realized through a mere allusion – as with a black hole in space, the presence and the “borders” of the literary Other, Different or Unknown should be concluded only by way of outlining its “event-horizon”, beyond which lies the specific mode of its non-existence. We can assert the existence and location of a black hole, but we cannot tell “what goes on inside it”. The literary Unknown, like a black hole, is an Unknown only if it doesn’t give anything away of its “absent inside”. This, thus, is the poetic tasks of the writer of the sublime: he should show that the unknown *is there* but he should not betray its *essence*, he should not “provide reality” but rather “allude to the unrepresentable”.

4. On the necessity of representing the unrepresentable

Having arrived at this point, it has become necessary to pose an as yet unanswered question: why choose such an approach in the first place – why ascribe such a great importance to the necessity of trying to represent the Other in literature? Why emphasise the need to maintain the Other as the Other, the Unknown as the Unknown? In Lyotard’s terms, why prefer a formal allusion (to the absent content) to the figurative description (of the present content)? In the current context, this necessity comes from a general ideological presupposition about literature: namely, the presupposition that literature has the faint power *either* to strengthen *or* to undermine the prevailing, dominant (ideological, cultural, lingual) reality. In other words, literature can either directly mirror this reality – mirror that what is “already evidently so” – and thereby uncritically strengthen its prevalence. Or it can take up a potentially critical position by assuming an estranging distance, and present us our reality and its inherent, implicit, subdued possibilities and its underlying conditions in an equal light, as if for the very first time. (Lyotard would call the former preference “realist” and the latter “modern” or “avant-garde”: the former has an “intention of avoiding the question of reality implied in the question of art”; the latter “refuses the consolation of correct forms”.) Ideally, in the light of the latter preference, reality and its hidden possibilities could emerge through fiction as something qualitatively New, and fiction could give hope to that which the uninterrupted flow of the dominant reality, ideology or “text” normally brushes aside. If one considers this to be the purpose of literary or poetic writing then one must also concede that the undermining of the prevalent reality, the representation of this reality’s possibilities from an equalizing distance can only take place through the *undomesticated* presence of the Other, the Different, the Unknown: the text has to include, as its central component, something which the dominant ideological reality is unable to familiarize, unable to make use of in the process of its immanent self-enhancement. In lyotardian terms, the text has to contain something that it can only *indirectly allude to* but cannot *figuratively describe*.

Thereby, Lyotard’s distinction between realism and the modern art bears definite merits while describing the nature and generic tendencies of science fiction. The Other has two faces or, rather, there are two separate kinds of Others: the realist other and the modernist other. The realist other differs from the modernist other in

the same way as a chimera-like construct differs from a formal allusion to an unrepresentable content – the former is equally conceivable and presentable, the latter is conceivable but not presentable. It is now evident that only the latter kind of Unknown – that which “the known” cannot domesticate – can be called the Other Proper. And it is now also evident, contrary to what might at first sight be expected, that the occurrence of this properly Other, this lyotardian “unrepresentable in representation itself”, is particularly rare in science fiction.

5. Representing the unrepresentable in science fiction

There is a good structural reason for the lack of the properly Other in science fiction – for the lack of that mere allusion to an absent content through which the Unknown can solely be maintained, and for science fiction’s inclination towards actually familiar, Chimera-like constructs. It is because of its almost generic commitment to mimetic representation, its “unspoken requirement” to solidify the abstract Other, Different or the Unknown to the level of the “material reality” of its depicted fictional world. Brian McHale has noted this tendency while comparing the poetics of cyberpunk science fiction (authors like William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and so on) and the poetics of what he calls “mainstream postmodernist fiction” (authors like James Joyce, Thomas Pynchon, and so on):

[W]hat typically occurs as a configuration of narrative structure or a pattern of language in postmodernist fiction tends to occur as an element of the fictional world in cyberpunk. Cyberpunk, one might say, translates or transcodes postmodernist motifs from the level of form (the verbal continuum, narrative strategies) to the level of content or “world”. To put it differently, cyberpunk tends to “literalize” or “actualize” what in postmodernist fiction occurs as a metaphor – metaphor not so much in the narrow sense of a verbal trope (though that is also a possibility) but in the extended sense in which a narrative strategy or a particular pattern of language use may be understood as a figurative reflection of an “idea” or theme. (McHale 1992: 246)

McHale’s assertion – made in another context and on somewhat different terms – can here be elevated to the overall generic level of science fiction and worded in previously used lyotardian terms: *due to its mimetic commitment, science fiction has the generic tendency to figuratively represent, on the level of fictional world or “content”, modern art’s formal allusions to that which is conceivable but not presentable, thereby almost inevitably turning these allusions into both conceivable and presentable Chimera-like constructs.* Such a materialization to the level of the fictional world or content always inclines towards direct wording, and direct descriptions tend to familiarize or domesticate the feeling of the sublime: that is why, in science fiction, we have so many flying cars but so few carefully crafted impenetrable Monoliths in the vein of Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (the Monolith, here, being science fiction’s finest equivalent to Malevich’s squares). And that might also be one of the reasons why science fiction has all too often been

considered “bad art”: it is, in Lyotardian terms, *essentially a realist practice* because it lacks sufficient allusion to the sublime excess of the Other.²

And so, in spite of the cognitive estrangement that the science-fictional texts generate when they project alien space-times, ecological systems, societies, creatures, technological devices and so on, most of them are still deeply embedded in and easily reduced to the ideological reality in which they were written. I have room here only for initial generalizations which can be easily contested with individual historical examples, but in the classic (Anglo-)American tradition it is quite rare when the science-fictional journey meets insoluble challenges, entities that cannot be familiarized, Unknown forces which the industrial capacities of the humankind cannot tame, or spaces which are not immediately reducible to cognitive surroundings of the cultural reality from which the text originates. Most of science fiction subjects the Other, the Unknown, or the unattainable to the gravity of prevailing (technocratic) ideology, and transforms it into an instrumental background on which the familiar belief in absolute knowledge and scientific progress can be constantly reaffirmed. In this respect, immediately extrapolative science fiction is particularly symptomatic: believable, plausible futuristic visions are attractive and pleasing specifically because reading them does not confront us with the undermining, unsettling aura of the sublime Other/the Unknown. This was predominantly the case with the Golden Age of science fiction in the 50s and 60s (if to consider, for example the scientific space-enthusiasm of Arthur C. Clarke or Robert Heinlein); and with the cyberpunk movement of the 80s where, underneath the dystopian tone of apparent resistance one could still perceive the alluring affect of travelling into the technological progress of digital non-space. More properly representative of the Other – but at the same much less characteristically science-fictional – was the speculative direction of the genre in the 60s and 70s. The works of Ursula LeGuin, J. G. Ballard or Philip K. Dick were relatively more freed from extrapolative compulsion and instead of metonymically developing the present reality further into the future they preferred to make a metaphorical leap from this reality to another one. And even here – and these *are* very broad brushstrokes – one usually stood quite far from the kind of Other directly represented by Kubrick’s *Monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey*. (The origin of the presence of the properly Other which can be peripherally glimpsed in the work of these authors can, once again, more easily be traced back to the level of *formal allusions*: Ballard in, for example, *The Atrocity Exhibition* experimented with form a lot and Dick’s worlds sometimes feel utterly incomprehensible or ungraspable not because of what they particularly

2 This is why we can find more efficient traces of this Otherness in “high” modernist literature – in, for example, Proust, Joyce, or Musil. According to Lyotard, “[i]n Proust the thing that is eluded as the price of this allusion [to the Other] is the identity of consciousness, falling prey to an excess of time. But in Joyce it is the identity of writing which falls prey to an excess of the book or literature. Proust invokes the unrepresentable by means of a language which keeps its syntax and lexicon intact, and a writing which, in terms of most of its operators, is still part of the genre of the narrative novel. [...] Joyce makes us discern the unrepresentable in the writing itself, in the signifier.” (Lyotard 1992: 23) And Kafka is here perhaps in many ways the characteristic intermediate example: it is he who seems, without assuming any spatiotemporal distance, to grotesquely defamiliarize everything already present in culture, all the socio-bureaucratic machinery that is utterly familiar to us and so on.

thematize – there are androids, aliens, half-dead, and so on in his worlds – but because of what they, on the level of the “structure” of the world, allusively leave out.³ In the present article, in an attempt to “stay true” to science fiction’s generic commitment to mimetic representation, I am focusing on the representability of the unrepresentable, on the possibility of alluding to the feeling of the sublime on *the concrete level of “content” or “fictional world”*.)

6. Representation of the unrepresentable in *Solaris*

But this doesn’t mean that there are no science-fictional works where the Other inhabits a central, structural place *on the level of the fictional world or “thematized content”*. Probably the most prominent science fictional work in this respect is Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* (Lem 2003).

In this novel, we approach two fictional stars, a blue and a red sun, in the light of which shines Solaris, an oceanic planet that by all suppositions is a single conscious organism. The novel begins when the psychologist Kelvin arrives at the research station floating just above Solaris. The scientists stationed there have explored the opaque and impenetrable surface of the planet already for decades and in many shifts. Having invented and used a thorough conceptual system for their research, they have achieved some success in creating a formal classification of the complex phenomena appearing on the planet’s surface, but they haven’t still, because of a lack of any verified answers reached a conclusion as to the meaning of their actions *as science* (see also Freedman 2000: 97–99). When Kelvin and his fellow researchers try to obtain a more aggressive contact with the planet, the research becomes traumatic. The Ocean responds to their invasive behaviour by explicating their inner psychological nature, at the same time revealing nothing about its own elusive core. In the best understanding of the researchers stationed on the space ship, the planet is experimenting with their minds, confronting them with their innermost repressed memories and the materialized forms of their thoughts. As a central example, Kelvin is mysteriously visited by his former lover who once committed suicide and he tries to handle the situation by first trying to get rid of her. But when this fails – the woman always comes back – he finally gives up his endeavours, falls in love once again and the bulk of the remaining days in the station is spent weirdly and controversially vegetating together. The novel only hints at the tortures that the other researchers are subjected to, but there remains an impression that these are even worse and more traumatic. The scientists finally find a way how to disintegrate the organic shape of Kelvin’s memories, but the ocean’s intellect nevertheless solidifies psychic phenomena in a way that is utterly incomprehensible to man. The mind of the planet is so radically different from the so-called objective consciousness of the researchers that communication between fails due to utter lack of any common ground. And so the readers depart Solaris with endless speculations and without any even remotely settling knowledge.

Formally, Lem’s novel is therefore an almost metaphysical *tractatus* about the

3 I owe this attentive reference to Brian McHale.

possibility of contact with the Other. The failure of the researchers' efforts is described through tens of pages of pseudo-scientific but in themselves believable and coherent descriptions of the surface of the planet and tens of pages which account the scientific history of its almost fruitless research. The absolute rationality and the extreme stylistic rigor of these descriptions form a stark contrast with the events in the research station and Solaris' own impenetrable nature. This field of tension is the novel's most important structural component, namely *due to this contrast*, Lem's work manages to maintain the Other as the Other: in the lyotardian terms used above, the planet Solaris is, in the thematic context of the novel and on the level of its fictional world, only being *alluded to*. The scientists trying to explore it merely conceive of its existence, but they are unable to (re)present it in their scientific language in a way that this language attained any effective *meaningful content*.

In this respect, *Solaris* is a very rare science-fictional limit-case. Instead of giving definite answers about the nature of the planet – instead of “providing reality” – Solaris projects an “absent content” and thereby provokes its protagonists (and the readers of the novel) to the path of asking countless further questions about its nature. Not betraying anything of the planet's essence, *Solaris* manages to represent the unrepresentable through a Kantian “negative presentation”, by “making one see only by prohibiting one from seeing”, by *refusing the consolation of correct forms* – and all this *on the thematized level of its science fictional world*.

7. Eastern European and American science-fictional traditions: ethical questioning vs. practical problem-solving

This way, *Solaris* efficiently explicates the difference between technocratic science fiction which is familiarizing and homely, and the properly estranging, unsettling and undermining science fiction. The former, by way of postulating chimera-like constructs which are easily reducible to the tendencies of the prevalent socio-economic reality, provides the reader with the singular clear answer of the dominating ideology. The latter, by way of introducing the Other that is maintained as the Other, urges the reader to ask an infinite number of questions, which, besides formally being about the exact nature of this Other, also address the conditional nature of the prevalent ideological reality. The impenetrable nature of this Unknown provokes the reader to search for alternative approaches towards reality and test them against the prevailing ideology. In accord with this, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr has remarked in his *Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* that “Solaris is a pure Novum⁴. It has no significant qualities other than its newness and difference. [- - -] It separates the history of human meanings, ideologies, projects, and successful experiments with existence, from the blank Novum that signifies only that these things do not apply.” (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr 2008: 68) In a very broad perspective, and

⁴ “Novum” is Darko Suvin's term for science fiction's central structural component, an element of the qualitatively new which introduces to the science fictional work a decisive estranging break that transforms all the other elements of the depicted fictional world. (See Suvin 1979: 64–67.)

on the general theoretical background of the representability of the unrepresentable, the example of *Solaris* thereby enables a comparative approach to the respective dominants of Eastern European and American science-fictional traditions. I agree with Csicsery-Ronay, Jr when he words the difference between the two traditions in terms of their readers' respective attitude towards the relationship between human beings and technology:

"The explicit ethical problematizing typical of Eastern European SF often strikes North American readers as overly abstract and dull. At the other extreme the fear of being seen as tedious moralists often leads U.S. science fiction writers to contortions; they try merely to hint at the ethical questions lying behind the power and thrill in the foreground. U.S. writers frequently assume that a relationship between human beings and technology that would entail tremendous ethical dilemmas already exists as an unproblematic *fait accompli*. The dominant feeling in the United States, as opposed to the more traditional attachments of Eastern Europe, is that enormous technological changes are inevitable, and will inevitably bring ethical changes largely without the conscious participation of the subjects involved. And it is obvious to anyone comparing the two SF cultures (I cannot speak about Japanese SF) that Eastern European education openly, indeed perhaps obsessively, harps on philosophical ethics versus pragmatic problem solving."⁵

Put in the terms of the current argument, the American tradition's tendency towards pragmatic problem solving ("the language of one prevailing answer") predominantly expresses itself through easily domesticated Chimera-like others, and is a symptom of a prevailing belief in the dominant technocratic ideology. The ethical questioning ("the language of infinite questions") of the Eastern European tradition, on the other hand, is more focused on the critical analysis of the technocratic ideology, and thereby inevitably requires the representation of the unrepresentable as its central structural component. This can be efficiently exemplified if one compares the domesticating and ultimately all-conquering space voyages undertaken by the protagonists of the writers of the American Golden Age (e.g. Heinlein and Clarke) to the ultimately inexplicable phenomena and spatial zones frequently present in the works of the most well-known authors of the Eastern European traditions (Lem, the brothers Strugatsky).

The difference between the two traditions can be briefly explained with the radically different ideological contexts they operated in: in the pre-1989 Soviet-block tradition, science fiction took the shape of either *direct and explicit*, essentially utopian praise of the ruling regime which is not discussed in the present article (artistically, the best example here being Ivan Yefremov's "Andromeda", a backward-looking utopia where the intergalactic communist order has long been victoriously established⁶) or the (unquestionably censure-induced) allusions to the (among

5 See <http://acad.depauw.edu/~icronay/flu.htm>

6 In the theoretical context of the present article, it can be argued that on the level of its content or „fictional world“, a classic, fully fleshed-out Utopian vision *lacks any kind of Other*.

everything else, also ideologically) Other which has been in the focus of the present article. The unproblematic problem-solving of the American tradition can be considered a mid-way between these two extremes: American science fiction of the Golden Age with its Chimera-like, reducible Others seems to be *moderately and implicitly* convinced in the positive capabilities of the continuing liberal-democratic technological progress of its time.

8. Conclusions

As a final note, the representation of the Other as the Other – realized by way of a tactful formal allusion to the absent content – raises the science-fictional work as much as possible above the time where it is historically embedded. The majority of science fiction has its event horizon – one should only consider the futuristic visions, the “good old-fashioned futures” which are past their “best before”, easily reducible to the cultural context they were written in, and increasingly obsolete and improbable compared to the horizons of the here-and-now of the contemporary world. The tactful maintenance of the Unknown as the Unknown is an obstacle to such obsolescence because it avoids historicity to the greatest possible measure and conserves the literary work as a pocket of eternity in time. *Solaris* does not have a “best before”, a horizon of obsolescence, because the nature of its Other prevents it from being conveniently reduced to the particular historical conditions of the time of its writing or the everyday here-and-now of its reader’s present. Few other science-fictional works leave the impression of having been so unreachably far and so in isolation from planet Earth and its historicity.

Returning to the metaphor I began with, the ambivalence and the infinite amount of questions potentially provoked by the presence of the Other as the Other holds an advantage over a singular and explanatory answer also with respect to the journeys that writers and poets undertake into the space of literature as such. Because the potentially infinite amount of these questions carries in itself a potential to reduce, as much as possible, the contrast between the singularity of a singular literary journey and the infinite expanse of the fictional outer space.

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The present article has followed the trajectory of presuppositions and conclusions outlined below:

- 1) Thematically, science fiction seems to be the literature that represents the Other/the Different/the Unknown.
- 2) Any kind of representation is always already anthropocentric, in order to be recognized as representation at all, that which is represented must in any case already be encoded to the language of human experience.
- 3) The literary representation of the Other can take the shape of either
 - (i) a “realistic” Chimera-like construct which is always easily reducible to the

equally conceivable and presentable content of the perceived “outer” reality or

(ii) a formal attempt to allude to the absent content of the feeling of the sublime which is conceivable but not presentable.

4) The Other of the (i) Chimera-like construct is always a direct reflection of the dominant, ideological reality. The Other of (ii) the formal allusion to the feeling of the sublime refuses and has the potential to undermine this reality.

5) Due to its prevalently mimetic commitment, science fiction has the generic tendency to figuratively represent, on the level of fictional world or “content”, modern art’s formal allusions to that which is conceivable but not presentable, thereby almost inevitably turning these allusions into both conceivable and presentable Chimera-like constructs. Its Other is therefore almost always a direct reflection of the dominant, ideological reality, and not the Other proper.

6) Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* is a rare example of the kind of science fiction which, by refusing to betray anything of the essence of its Other, manages to allude to the feeling of the sublime on the level of its fictional world or “content”.

7) Such kind of science fiction, involving itself in elaborating the ethical implications of domesticating the Other, is more frequent in the (pre-1989) Eastern-European tradition than in the American Golden Age tradition, which, with the support of an implicit belief in the domesticating powers of the prevalent technocratic ideology, thematically largely concerns itself with pragmatic problem-solving.

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